

Good for Others

In today's gospel passage a paralyzed man is brought to Jesus, who says to him, 'be of good cheer, your sins are forgiven'. The man responds by standing up and walking home.

I see this as a story about the way in which God relates to people. It suggests that however bad you feel about yourself, however much you are crippled with anxiety or blanketed with depression, God's attitude towards you is one of loving acceptance, of the forgiveness that wants to see you stand up and flourish as the person you truly are - not the terrible, debilitated monster you might believe yourself to be. In short, the story suggests that God's attitude to us a loving and merciful one that would heal us of our ailments, forgive our shortcomings and draw us to fulfilment.

There is another story here, of course. You could call it the 'disapproval of the religious authorities' story. Who does Jesus think he is, healing the sick, making the debilitated well, encouraging the downcast, and letting the paralyzed walk?

Well, who *does* Jesus think he is? The answer is that Jesus thinks he's Jesus! Jesus is the one who saves; that's what his name means, and that's what his life, death and resurrection mean.

The starting point for Christianity is not that we are born good or that we are doing well and living successful and praiseworthy lives, but that we are in some kind of trouble, in some kind of pain or distress; that we are in some way alienated not only from God, but also from ourselves and each other.

People have often asked the question of what it is to be a good person, and how we might become good. And in this sermon I am going to sketch out a core aspect of the Christian response to that question.

In Christianity, the primary challenge is not the challenge to be a good person in a general sense, but to be the best possible version of you. This is the common vocation of all people: to become the person God made us to be and calls us to be, to become the person whom Jesus saves and heals us to be, to become the person whom the Holy Spirit inspires and enables us to be.

And it is help with this central life-task that our epistle reading (Ephesians 4. 17-end) offers us. It first expresses it in terms of becoming a 'new self', This is not new in the sense of 'completely different' but in the sense of 'restored', 'refreshed', 'renewed' – rather in the way that our organ is restored and renewed. The idea is also put forward that we should *clothe* ourselves differently, that is acquire new and better and more fitting habits, attitudes and virtues.

Before turning to the question of what these virtues might be, the writer touches on another point, one that is perhaps a bit surprising given the emphasis on the individual that has been developing here. The point is this: that we are all

members of one another. What this makes clear is that from a Christian point of view human beings are not to understand ourselves as isolated individuals, but as members of communities. We are people who are fundamentally related and relational. This is why, according to the epistle, telling the truth matters. We owe it to each other to be honest and straightforward. There is no need to be blunt, but being candid is certainly a Christian virtue. It is how we make community. And in Christianity making community is what life is all about. This has a very big impact on the way in which our religion understands what it means to be good.

When you become the best version of yourself that you can possibly be you become a person who is good for others. The best way of being you is the way that builds others up. A good person in Christianity is a person who is, among other things, encouraging of others and is a healing and reconciling presence in the community.

We note that the epistle also advises us not to steal. This reflects the Ten Commandments and needs no further explanation. Then it proposes that it is okay to get angry when provoked but that it's wrong to let your anger morph into bitterness, or sourness, or vindictive resentment. This is bad from every perspective. Both the giver and the receiver of bitterness in human affairs are its victim.

It's worth noting just how much emphasis this advice places on speaking well and kindly. 'Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth', and, let all 'clamour and evil-speaking' be put away from you is how the Authorized Version puts it. The more contemporary translation that we had today advises us to avoid 'evil talk', 'wrangling' and 'slander'. We get the idea.

What we say and how we say it really do matter. Children used to chant that 'words will never hurt me'. But that is itself a fib. Many people are harmed by words; but the spiritual reality is that we are more deeply harmed by the nasty words that we say about others than by the nasty words that others say about us. We should watch what we say, recognizing that we can all too easily reveal and encourage the worst side of our nature and at the same time make life difficult or painful for someone else.

So when it comes to the temptation to gossip, slander, to spread a bit of misery or malice, or to give voice to our bitterness or resentment, we would be well advised to zip it. If you are full of anger, spite or jealousy go and talk to a therapist, or a priest or a trusted and mature friend. It is one thing to be angry for a while; quite another to hold on to it. It is often hard to forgive, to let go of resentment, but being inclined to forgive is part of the package of virtues that make up the character of the good Christian. As the Epistle concludes, 'be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you'.

These are words, like all those in this short passage from the letter to the Ephesians, that we should take to heart not because they are commandments or

instructions, but because they describe the attitudes and habits we need to develop if we are to become the person who God made us to be. That person is the best possible version of you. And the best possible version of you is a person who is good for others.

Sermon preached at King's College Chapel
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