

DEEDS NOT WORDS (MT 21:28-32)

Twenty Sixth Sunday Ord Time A 2017 Boarbank Hall

There is a very surprising amount of self-criticism in the Bible. Only in the light of this general fact can we appreciate why so much that seems downright insulting in it is tolerated. When we look back at the material served up by the prophets the greatest portion of it seems to be castigating the Jews for falling below the ideals they were supposed to honour. Self-congratulation is a very rare phenomenon. The "I feel good" factor is a foreign body in the biblical experience. Much of the new Testament reflects the OT experience. Matthew really castigates the Pharisees, and Paul did not spare recalcitrant Christians. So much of this biblical material is good common sense. We can feel ourselves agreeing with what is being said. In today's Gospel we find a slice of realism. We all know the person who gives a cheery 'yes' and then does nothing about it. Indeed we might very well be that person. And we also know the grumbling type who is incapable of saying 'yes', but somehow still manages to come out on the side of the angels. He or she honours promises however reluctantly!

Today's Gospel

But why does Jesus express himself this way in today's Gospel? This time the problem is with the two different sets of Jews, those who refuse or accept Jesus and John the Baptist. And Matthew in his own day in his community is probably reflecting the disagreements with the Jews concerning John the Baptist and Jesus. The language is emotive. Prostitutes and sinners will get into the kingdom of God ahead of those who think they are in a safe haven. In a world of religious commitment one can see the effect this kind of language would have. It was devastating, and reflected recrimination between the parties.

But where are we in all of this today? Religious indifference is more probably our experience. But there can be an occasional hint of superiority in the way people choose to celebrate the liturgy. Most ordinary people are probably polite about religion except when they think it attacks their freedom to be different, especially in questions of morality. But we have seen enough fanaticism in the context of the recent wars in the Middle East not to be complacent. Intolerance, ignorance and pride can be spread widely by contemporary multi media.

St. Paul

Today's second reading accentuates humility (Phil 2:1-11). Christ, the Son of God is the personification of self-giving with humility. A humble person is genuinely considerate of

other people. He or she puts others first. We should have no problem realizing today that supreme individualism is all too common among us. In the pagan world where early Christianity was emerging humility was seen as a weakness. Educated Greeks had no time for it. It characterized slaves. But in that context Christianity was creating the contrast society. Since Jesus, God's Son, had chosen to live like a slave then he was the only model to follow. No more boasting, no more superiority, no more snobbery, no more despising other people. There is a place for everyone because everyone who wants to be a Christian wants to have the mind and heart of Christ Jesus. When people got tired of the world of selfishness and self indulgence, and a lack of respect, they found the small Christian communities havens of decency. This was a major contributing factor in the conversion of the Roman Empire (Karl Christ, *The Romans*, University of California Press, 1985, pp.165-168). It was an ideal, of course. But it was realized, sometimes very well. St. Paul is very optimistic in speaking of it to his beloved Philippians (4:1-7).

Today

What can we say of it today? Most of us shudder when we look out and find refugees risking everything to get a better life and avoid persecution. We may not be able to do much about it. But we who have so much would certainly not feel superior to these unfortunates. It is helpful to recall that in the nineteenth century poor people from the United Kingdom were deported for minimal offences like petty theft. There was a special part of the penal colony in Van Diemen's land- today's Tasmania- for children as young as ten years old and some of them committed suicide in despair. Back in ordinary society in Britain those who sentenced them may well have retired with good consciences to their comfortable life, happy they had solved another social problem. We do not have to feel superior to anyone now as we ask what we can do about today's demands, knowing that many among us have been helping those who have come here. Language lessons and legal advice are offered, and clothing and food are provided as they move on to where the civic authorities send them. It is humility often just to say we do not know what more we can do. Where we can have influence we may be able to exercise it, encouraging tolerance and avoiding indifference. Humility can characterize communities as well as individuals. Public expressions of sorrow and regret are indicative of such. We have seen examples of such in the recently established committees of peace and reconciliation.

Conclusion

On a personal note, I am just back from a week in Rome as chaplain at a conference of medical professionals. They are mainly Catholics and they came from all over the world. They use their expertise to improve the lot of their suffering patients at home and on the various missions. They came together in Rome to strengthen their faith and the reasons for it. Just as we come here to Mass to strengthen ours, praying for ourselves and for each other. We live our Christianity where we are and what we experience here is very good indeed. I am sure we all thank God for it, and want to do what we can to make sure it has a future here. It is also a day of prayer for prisoners and their dependents. Many-but of course, not all- are in prison because they are poor and deprived, lonely and unloved, and have always been so. Well, God help them.

A happy Sunday to you all. Amen.

Richard J. Taylor