

Caring for God's Creation: the stewardship that God asks of us

*From a sermon preached at Culford parish church on Sunday 27th September 2020
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Apparently, as of late-September 2020, only 18% of people with coronavirus symptoms are actually isolating, and likewise those advised through 'test and trace' to isolate mostly don't. The gap is pointed out between expected or intentional actions, and the reality of what does happen.

Our Lord, having a very accurate knowledge of human nature, uses this gap between intention and reality as the basis of one of his parables (Matthew 21v28-32). One son in the parable says he won't comply with the father's request but eventually does, while the other says he will, but doesn't. I think we are seeing such responses today. Maybe also there are people who first of all grumble and object to an instruction but think better of it and accept the inconvenience for the sake of the general good – and in the present case for the lessening of the spread of the virus.

In the parable we may again see the depiction of God as vineyard-owner, with people working for him; here they're family. We say we're all children of God, of the family, though many of us may find it difficult to accept God's will and, as the epistle said, to look to the interests of others rather than to our own.

The Gospel parable follows a challenging conversation between Jesus and the chief priests and elders in the Temple. They query his authority. So, he asks them what they thought of John the Baptist, - the authority for his teaching. They don't want to admit divine inspiration for that, but know the ordinary people do, seeing John as a great prophet. Now the people are seeing signs of Messiahship in Jesus, after his triumphal entry on what we call Palm Sunday. The priests are angry but silenced for the time being.

The story of the two sons is unique to Matthew; by itself it shows the difference between words and deeds. Words carry little weight if deeds do not follow. (*To rely on words, not deeds, might be said to be the 'calling's snare' for clergy.*) However, the parable is used here to contrast behaviours between people not normally careful about the Jewish Law (the tax-collectors and prostitutes) who did hear and obey the call from John the Baptist, - and people punctilious about prescribed rituals (the chief priests and elders) unwilling to accept a need for repentance, as from John and now Jesus. This contrast is between an openness to hear and respect, leading to reverence, and a self-satisfied pride reluctant to change and dismissing the need for it.

We are still in the season the Church is calling Creationtide, and it has taken on a more urgent aspect. Human stewardship of the planet has been shown to be not only negligent but exploitative. We may have enjoyed the beauties of nature (and this is here a very beautiful time of year) – but we have compartmentalised our view of living and failed to see there is a dark and painful side to civilisation's progress. There is a need for change.

Humanity has always produced rubbish. Our ancient forebears' dwellings had piles of it, - middens, as they're known. And only a century and a half ago, London was subject to the Great Stink, from the River Thames. Action was imperative then, for a proper sewage system, masterminded by one Joseph William Bazalgette. But the various types and levels of pollution in today's world are a far greater matter, and for too long we have been like the son in the parable who said, Yes, he would do what was needed, and did not do it.

Our compartmentalising has enabled advances in many aspects of living because people have been able to devote their thinking and work to one narrow area of research and development, without considering the wider field of consequences. We have overlooked the intricate interdependence of the living world. A mediaeval scholar, as a new book (*The Light Ages* by Seb Falk) reminds us, would try to keep abreast of all disciplines of knowledge. The study of the world, the whole created cosmos, was a route to moral and spiritual wisdom. That is, religion and science were happily united. But we have forgotten that nature is continuous, with living things each fulfilling their own useful task in preserving it, in habitat and life cycles. We may see wasps as a picnic pest, but in the wider context their importance as pollinators is growing as bee numbers decline.

The Scriptures hold several stories of how overweening arrogance and pride lead to downfall and loss, from the Tower of Babel onwards. But there is still so much beauty in the world around us. We should remember we are part of it, that we belong in the whole living system, are not separate from it. Our ability to develop knowledge of it should be for the overall good of the earth, our home. Information can spread so much more quickly now than ever before. This being the case, mutual care and co-operation over great distance give a new need. It's a widening of the second great commandment in Our Lord's summary of the Law, that we love our neighbour as ourselves. The whole earth, with all life on it, is our neighbour.

The collect for the 16th Sunday after Trinity joins it all up: we pray for God's help 'to perceive and know what things we ought to do' and to have 'the grace and power to fulfil them'.

O Lord, we beseech you mercifully to hear the prayers of your people who call upon you; And grant that they may both perceive and know what things they ought to do, and also may have the grace and power faithfully to fulfil them; through Jesus Christ our Lord, ...

Amen.