

Pentecost 20
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Mark the Evangelist

Exodus 14:19 - 31

Exodus 15:1 - 11

Romans 14:1 - 12

Matthew 18:21 - 35

The Yes/No brothers and the mind that was in Christ

There are people whom we expect to be reliable but let us down, while others who have refused us turn and give us what we want.

The parable of the Yes/No brothers (this title for the brothers suggested by B Brown Taylor, p 187 *Home by Another Way*) was directed against the chief priests and elders who challenged Jesus over what seemed to be unauthorised interference in their domain. In particular the religious leaders were irate over two things: Jesus' dramatic entry into Jerusalem where the crowds hailed him, singing Psalms that had messianic references, and his cleansing of the Temple, after which he healed the blind and the lame, and Psalms were again sung in his honour. The religious leaders might have understood acts healing and praise of God as actions of the Spirit at work in their midst opening the kingdom in new ways. But, instead they sought to trap Jesus into claiming God's authority for his actions, laying himself open to a charge of blasphemy. Not wanting to get caught in their own trap, they refused to answer his question of whether or not John the Baptist's work was of God.

The parable of the Yes/No brothers is the sting in the tale. Those who said Yes but then lived as if they meant No were the religious leaders who had the appearance of being for God, but when it came to the crunch could not embrace the working of the Spirit. Those who said No and then Yes were the tax collectors and prostitutes who responded to John with open hearts. John's heaven led ministry had a big effect on the despised and marginalized who found in him what was not readily on offer from the religious establishment. At the Jordan, and in now in the Temple people rejoiced that the grace and mercy of God was extended to them. But the work of John and Jesus was a source of criticism of the leadership, who were not alert to the moving of the Spirit and had allowed the Temple to be a market instead of a place of prayer.

Given the problems the religious leaders had in maintaining a clear vision of their responsibilities and a true openness to the working of the Spirit it is profitable to ask: what work are we asked to undertake in the vineyard of God, and how can we stay on track? How can our Yes remain a yes?

Our work is to live in praise of the gracious and merciful God who is the source of all life. It is interesting that in Matthew, when Jesus cleanses the Temple, the blind and the lame are healed and the children sing a psalm of Praise. Liturgy and concrete expressions of mercy are inextricably linked. The children sang because, in what Jesus was doing the little ones - the believers - caught sight of the fact that the Kingdom was open, and God indeed cared for the world.

When Paul wanted to help the Philippians find a basis for their ethical conduct in the world, he chose a song - probably the earliest Christian hymn we have. This poetic expression of Jesus' work is hardly surpassed by all the Creeds and doctrinal statements that have followed. If you had to gather two or three things to carry in a kit bag as a guide to Christian faith and life, this is one you must have.

In the hymn there is a pattern of movement, commencing with what Jesus did, and concluding with what God did. Jesus lived as one who gave up his own prerogatives for the sake of doing the will of God. This chosen mindset defined the direction and outcome of his life. Remember the snake in the Garden and the Tempter in the Wilderness. In answer to the snake's suggestion Adam and Eve relished the chance to become like God, but in the wilderness, Tempted by the Devil, Christ Jesus did not. He turned aside from an option for self-advancement and chose to align himself with the divine will. His yes was yes. He continued to choose to go all the way with God, in solidarity with human beings even to his death on the cross.

The second part of the hymn tells us that God responded to Jesus' actions by exalting him and giving him a name, at which every knee should bow. The name is not Jesus. The name is "Lord": the Hebrew title for the unspoken name of God. What this means is that after his death, it was made clear that Jesus really had revealed God and the way God is to the world. There was no difference between his chosen mindset and the mindset of God.

Jesus did not chance his arm here: he did not humble himself hoping to be promoted and rewarded. Lowliness was not just one of those things Jesus had to go through to get to the top. And we should not think of this as a pathway to our own success. He chose God, and the outcome was it became clear God named him as the one who truly revealed the way of divine being. Because of this Jesus has been given the name Son of God. This has nothing to do with gynaecology. It means he is the one in whom we can see what the union of the divine will and human life looks like. There is no difference for us in looking at Jesus and God, for he is God's anointed beloved "child".

Paul uses this powerful hymn to provide a foundation for ethical conduct amongst the Philippians, namely greater generosity and self-giving that builds community and solidarity, rather than rivalry and contempt. Earlier (1:20 – 26) Paul, who is writing from Prison, shows that he reads his own life in the light of the story of Jesus, and he calls the Philippians to do the same. He is recalling them to the foundation of the faith they have, which involves going deeper into their original Yes towards Christ. It is not so much that they must copy Christ's life in detail. The challenge is to choose and follow the same mindset that was in him. It means to enter ever more deeply into life on that basis, rather than adopt specific forms of behaviour. That is why the question "what would Jesus do?" does not apply. To live according the same mindset of Christ is to live a life that is accountable to God who in Christ has shown that we are loved.

These days people gag over words like "Son" and "Lord" – but they are titles for something that is beyond gender and patriarchy. They are coded clues that direct us to Christ as the one in whom God's way of divine being has been made clear in the world. But our attachment to Christ does not mean we despise anyone else's faith.

The clue is to attend to what it means to live in the mindset of Christ. One writer has said "...it is quite possible that a non-Christian may live...in a Christ-like way without being conscious of the fact, while a Christian ...may fill his or her life with the name of Christ without ever entering deeply into the reality of what Christ means." [Demetrius Dumm *Cherish Christ Above All Other* p 47] A No person may live in a way that is really a Yes. And it is possible for a Yes person to live in a way that is really No.

But if what Paul is saying here is true, if the way of divine being has truly been revealed in Christ, this is a great gift to us, and why would we seek life elsewhere?