

Pentecost 23
27/10/2013

Mark the Evangelist

Joel 2:23-32

Psalm 65

2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18

Luke 18:9-14

To decide.

As is hinted at in the gospel snippet we heard this morning, and as most of us know from our wider knowledge of the gospels, Jesus and the Pharisees did not see eye-to-eye. Perhaps surprisingly, one of the reasons the Pharisees came into such conflict with Jesus was that, in many respects, Jesus' own outlook seemed very similar to theirs. Had Jesus been a thief or murderer there would have been little of the struggle we see in the gospels; judgement and dismissal at the extremes of morality and religious piety is easy. It was, rather, because Jesus was just off centre so far as the Pharisees are concerned, that there was a problem. He was dangerous because he mostly *looked* pious in the same way the Pharisees were but at the same time he seemed also to be wilfully fast and loose with things which matter. That is, Jesus exercised a personal freedom which looked like impiety.

From the point of view of the Pharisees, it was a clash of moral systems: theirs versus that of Jesus. The question was – and is today for the Pharisee in all of us – what is the right thing to do, which system of rules is correct? The importance of this question is that the right thing to do is linked to being in a right relationship to God. If I do the right thing, then I will be in right relation to God and, therefore, in right relationship to those around me. Confident that he knows well the rules, the Pharisee of Jesus' story is able to declare himself righteous. From the point of view of the Pharisee, it is possible to know what the right thing to do is, and to do it. It is possible, then, to know ourselves as good, or as bad, according to whether we have done the right.

From the point of view of the gospel, however, Jesus manifests a completely different moral sense. It is not that he is immoral or impious, as the Pharisees charged, but that Jesus' morality sits in a different relation to God's judgement than does that of the Pharisee. The Pharisee in the story knows himself to be in the right before God on the basis of what he has done and, so, does not really need any assistance on the part of God. Jesus, on the other hand, knows himself not as having *achieved* rightness before God, but as having it *before* he could achieve it. He knows that he cannot but be the "son" of God. This is not sonship in the full-blown trinitarian sense but in the sense of a fullness of humanity which springs from a proper and secure relationship to God. That is, Jesus knows himself as "son" regardless of what he says and does. This doesn't mean he can then do anything he likes; clearly he does not go on an immoral rampage. What it does mean is that he is able to exercise a peculiar and, to the rest of us, troubling freedom.

This freedom is costly, and in a different way in which the moral commitments of the Pharisee is costly. The Pharisee denies himself many things in order to meet the demands of the law, and this constitutes a great cost. Yet, this self-denial also, in the eyes of the Pharisee, brings great reward: it is clear what the law requires and clear also that the requirements have been met.

But the cost of the freedom which Jesus exercises is that it is not possible to demonstrate the righteousness of his action, for it contradicts the letter of the law, which is why what he says and does looks impious. And because he looks impious, judgement is drawn down on him by those who take offence at the liberties he takes.

This difference between Jesus and the Pharisee is critical for understanding Jesus' call to discipleship: "deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me". This cannot simply mean "do the right thing", for this is precisely the call which the Pharisee makes to himself and do others, and which Jesus clearly contradicts. The bearing of the cross is not simply a matter of living a good moral life, which is certainly a difficult achievement. It is a matter of being free not to be righteous in that way, should this on some occasion be the call of God.

Now, as I was writing all of this I had a strong sense of wandering into the very dark and thick forests of moral dilemma, and will now quickly back out again! The temptation quickly becomes to develop from what Jesus does a system for working out when a law might be broken and when not, which is a thoroughly Pharisaical thing to do.

But if we don't go that way, it will help to unpack how a sense of accountability and judgement impacts upon our decision-making, to note the *anxieties* about judgement which feed into our thinking about how to act when it is not clear how to act.

Because it has now become a matter to which we are going to have to return in a fundamental way, I will try to do this in relation to the question of our future as a congregation and that future's connection with the renovation (or not) of the church building. Last week we considered something of the Synod's role in all of this, and something of what the whole church might need if we are to be able to move forward together. Today, we'll consider what it is which faces *us* in our particular situation.

We know, of course, the general decision which confronts us: whether to fix the building, or not. The question of where the money will come from is almost secondary; we are not without the means to do the work even with the loss of the properties the Synod is taking. It is just that, whatever we do, the future will not be the same as the past. This, of course, is always the case for the living. But the important point is that any future which *matters* will not simply "happen". We will have to *decide* its shape, and it is *decision* which brings anxiety about judgement, and so creates trouble for a community as it seeks to find a way forward together.

Judgement springs from accountability, from our having to respond to some demand on us, from our being "respons-able". These accountabilities are sometimes very obvious: there are statutory responsibilities associated with owning heritage buildings. It seems that *someone* is going to have to fix the church, whether us or someone else, and there are penalties which apply if we are adjudged not to have responded appropriately to this requirement. We have to decide how to respond to this requirement.

Other accountabilities, however, are much more subtle although just as pervasive and influential as the obvious ones. If we find a way not to proceed with the building, there is the perceived judgement by those who have gone before us: perhaps a sense of guilt that we have failed and squandered what was given to us. There is also the possible judgement of those who may follow: we may never be able to get back what we might now consider giving up; "don't sell the family jewels" is the slogan sometimes bandied about here. There may be the sense that we are presenting a retreat

– a weakness – to the wider community should we allow another church building to become a residential space or, perhaps, even a mosque. There is the strangely close-to-heart concern about the need to be able to conduct a big funeral which, more fundamentally, concerns the question of what is necessary for worship to be worship; architecture is for us very much wound up in all of that.

On the other clear option, while we have the means to do the work ourselves it would come at considerable cost to the work of Hotham mission and the congregation itself. There are voices which speak within us, creating anxieties about self-indulgence or overcapitalising in a building larger than our needs and costly to maintain, all at the expense of outreach in service or evangelism.

A fear of judgement by one or many such judges is not far from our thinking about how to act. Sometimes the judge is more obviously “God” – sell your possessions and give alms to the poor – sometimes more obviously each other with our different dreams and visions of the future, our different reading of what “the law” requires.

About our church building we know at this stage not much more than that we have to make a decision and that the Synod which has taken away has proposed also a kind of giving, which we must consider. But, whatever comes of the Synod’s proposal to develop our property as a richer source of income, we must still *decide*. Or, to put the matter more strongly, we must “cut off”, for that is what the word “de-cide” literally means. We must sever something from something else, and stand before God and each other with the two parts in our hands, one to leave behind and one to fall behind.

In a sense, the current property divestments and the loss of our funding plan for the church renovation is a bit of a distraction from the main problem facing the church today: our capacity to decide a future rather than simply acquiesce to whatever actually happens. It is a distraction because we can be angry with the Synod for decisions which have led to the loss of the funding. And yet the fact is, we were looking at serious funding problems with our renovation anyway, at least in the time scale originally proposed. We would very likely have had to – as we may yet still have to – wrestle with more questions of ministry and mission expenditure against property costs and long-term sustainability of the parish mission.

On the bigger picture, the divestments which are being rushed through in the next 12 months, or others like them, would likely have happened by natural attrition over the next 10-15 years anyway. Whereas last week I criticised the Synod for treating our debt troubles as a kind of natural disaster in which no one is accountable, this is how the church as a whole tends to understand its current situation in the world. The wind and rain grow stronger and stronger and there are fewer and fewer hands to hold the cover over our heads, and one by one those covers are blown or washed away and we run for cover to a slightly stronger group, to help them hold their tarp down a bit longer. What many in the church have long lamented is our inability to make strong decisions in our present condition, not least the decision to re-organise and rationalise before it is too late for, with a few exceptions, our decisions about the future of our congregations come too late. Or, to put it differently, in fact no decision is typically made, for we rather acquiesce to what has become clearly inevitable.

Decisions – real cuttings away of possible futures for a particular one – require a freedom which is rare even in the church, because we are for the most part legalists. Whether, in the end, we as a congregation choose to cut ourselves away from these buildings, or whether we choose to stay, we will only be justified in our choice if it is

free – knowing the risks, and stepping forward one way or another. It must be, as such, a decision made in faith, but not the kind of faith which is a wishful hope that things might just work out as we hope and envision. In God's work *our* hopes and visions are as least as much a hindrance as a help. The faith involved in "deciding" is that ours is a God who raises the dead, and it does not matter whether we survive our decisions or not. "For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's" (Romans 14.8).

This the terrifying freedom which makes possible a journey to Jerusalem, suspecting that it may well be a journey to a cross. Whatever we decide, and however we come to that decision, it is the same kind of freedom we are to exercise, as we think together, and resolve.

The Pharisees were good people, and nothing I've said this morning should be heard to be a contribution to the demonising of them which is been part of our Christian history. For the role they play in the gospel is *our* role – they are we, as we typically seek to stand before each other and before God.

As the Pharisee and the tax collector stand before God, they model the two fundamental alternatives of the moralist and the free child of God. The moralist knows what is required, what he has done and can list his achievements and expect his reward, as does the Pharisee in the story. The free child of God does not list her good works or her failures, as the tax collector does not, but rather knows God as merciful, desiring to heal and forgive and so knows herself as free to succeed or fail in her own eyes and others', living not out of anxiety before a judgement which *divides* us from God and others but out of faith that God judges to *reconcile* by raising and restoring what might have died.

Marvellous buildings such as these almost invariably have built into their foundations stones which declare to the effect of "Erected to the glory of God". We need not doubt that this was the case. The interesting question is whether, in a different time and space, they might also be allowed to crumble and fall "to the glory of God". Our time with Jeremiah showed us that, at least once, this happened. In our time, I do not know – I really do not.

Indeed I do not think we can know. And yet we must decide.

This being the case, the question is only whether, in making that decision, we address God as the Pharisee who praises God for the decision he – the Pharisee has taken – or the tax collector who asks for mercy for his decisions.

Let us seek that it be the latter. Amen.
