

Sunday 4th August 2013

St Barnabas, E17.

Theme: Putting love above judgement

Last Monday, Pope Francis made a comment that took many by surprise. In answer to a question from a journalist, he said this, “If a person is gay, and seeks God and has good will, who am I to judge him?” Let’s be clear, the Pope has not delivered a new teaching on homosexuality. There is no indication that he is planning to drop the Roman Catholic Church’s official stance...but...and this but is very significant...he has changed dramatically the church’s tone. The previous pope never even used the word “gay” and, indeed, consistently used negative and condemnatory language when talking about gay people. Pope Francis has changed the tone, and in a way that is similar to his approach on other issues, he has, as one commentator expressed it, put “people above dogma”.

In today’s gospel reading someone puts a question to Jesus and Jesus’ response is not dissimilar to the response given by Pope Francis. Jesus replied, “Friend, who set me to be judge or arbitrator over you?” or to paraphrase, “Friend, who am I to judge?”

I invite you to take a deeper look at this passage with me and to consider it in relation to what I am calling “putting love above judgement”.

Let’s first consider the question asked, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” Biblical scholars comment on this request in the context of what they have discovered about inheritance practices of the time. It was the custom for inherited land to be kept together, to be passed down to the whole family. The land, money and property were regarded as a means of keeping the family unit together. But there was a provision, only if the oldest brother agreed, for the inheritance to be divided and the man seeking Jesus’ intervention is asking Jesus to rule in his favour, seemingly against the rest of the family’s wishes, that the inheritance, and hence the family, should be divided.

So, how does Jesus respond? The first thing to note about his response is how he addresses the younger brother. He has called Jesus “teacher” or “rabbi”, appealing to Jesus’ authority...Jesus responds by calling him “friend”. There is no attempt here to laud it over the man, no attempt by Jesus to assert his authority over him. Jesus calls him “friend” and speaks to him as a friend. He does give advice, as we shall

see, but it is given as friendly advice, not as an order for the man to obey instructions but as the words of one friend to another.

Second, Jesus uses that phrase akin to asking “who am I to judge?” He changes the tone. He does not respond with an austere judgement. He does give a judgement but he gives it, as we will discover, in quite an indirect way. The intention of the advice is not to put the man right or wrong according to dogma, but to use holy wisdom to help the man direct his life towards human flourishing. He will say to the man, “take care” and in giving his advice, Jesus is offering a perspective which is intended to care for the man, or more specifically to encourage him to care for himself.

Third, Jesus gets to the heart of the issue. He says to the man, “take care” and he sees that what the man has to take care about is greed. Jesus says’ “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” Now he does not say to the man, “you are greedy”... but he encourages him to take care of all kinds of greed.

Then fourth, rather than talk about how the man is being greedy in seeking his share of the inheritance, Jesus tells a

story, he tells a parable, tells it as an encouragement to the man he has called friend to think about his life and whether he is placing too much importance on possessions. Jesus makes the point through the story that possessions give temporary pleasure but do not make for that longer-lasting deep peace and contentment that are the marks of heaven. Jesus encourages the man to cultivate those things which would make him rich in the sight of God and not to store up treasures only for himself.

In summary, a man approaches Jesus looking to service his own needs, to get that to which he was entitled under the law but at the expense of causing damage to his family relationships. It is not without significance that Jesus says of the man in his parable ‘he thought to himself’... in other words he came to his own decision rather than reaching a decision in the context of discussion with his family or community. Jesus sees the man is potentially destroying himself by his greed and egoism, by his “I want” attitude. Jesus calls the man a friend and offers friendly advice. He does so in the unthreatening form of a story, with the aim of helping the man to take care of himself in the best sense of ensuring that he acts in a way pleasing to God and not merely out of his own selfish desires.

What are we to make of this for our own lives? How do we respond to others? Sometimes, what might be called “a severe mercy” or “a tough love” is the right response. As friends and family members, we need at times to give judgements to others to help them help themselves. But how we judge is the key. Is our emphasis on dogma or the person? Are we delivering judgement for their good or for our good, or even for the good of the institution, be it the Church, our workplace, our family reputation, whatever? Are Jesus’ response to the man is as much a lesson for the one giving judgement as the one receiving it. Do we not need at times to drop our own desire to defend a position or defend an institution as much as the man needed to drop his claim on the possessions he desired? Well, who am I to judge? Instead let me tell us all a little story, the message of which I direct as much to myself as to the rest of you. It is a story from another tradition, but I hope we can apply it to our lives as Christians.

A man approached the Buddha with flowers in his hands. As he got near, he heard the Buddha say “drop it!” He could not believe he was being asked to drop his flowers. He thought maybe he was being invited to drop the flowers in his left hand so he dropped those and held on to the ones in his right hand. Still Buddha said “drop it!” This time he dropped

the flowers in his right hand and stood empty handed before the Buddha. The Buddha smiled, looked at the man and said, “drop it!” What am I supposed to drop said the man, I dropped all the flowers already! “Not what you were holding”, said the Buddha, “but the one holding them!” (De Mello, The Prayer of the Frog, p195).

What are we being asked to drop as we seek to put love before judgement in our lives as Christians? Let us ponder this question and once we have identified it, I invite us all to “drop it!”

Steven Saxby, August 2013.