

Sermon Trinity 7 – Cathedral Eucharist Sunday 14th July 2013

Luke 10 verse 28: ‘Jesus said to the lawyer: “You have given the right answer”’.

From TV panel games to public examinations to interviews to decisions on health and education, this is just surely what we all want to hear: “You have given the right answer!” Great, it’s the right answer – you’ve just won £30,000 pounds..... Good, I wrote down all the right answers, it’s going to be 10 A* GCSEs! And on it goes. I don’t know how you are about it all, but I seemed to have spent my whole life from being a toddler to my current great age trying to get it right and wanting to hear those words “You have given the right answer!” quickly followed by a longed-for pat on the head, a bit like an obedient dog, and accompanied by a ‘well done!’

The lawyer and Jesus of course had quite a complex and interesting array of ‘right answers’. This is one of them: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself.” We know as Christian people that that that has to be the right answer. The lawyer had quoted the law and got it right. Well done, lawyer! But then, of course, comes the story of the Good Samaritan – the answer to the lawyer’s question ‘Who is my neighbour?’ Quite often, you see, right answers are enshrined in stories, especially when we are examining what it means to love..... what love actually looks like.

Of course, a parable like this doesn’t describe the world the way it is. Nor does the parable tell us what we can do. The parable tells us what God can do. Let’s not get it wrong. The Bible gives us a vision of the kingdom that comes when God’s will is done.

When we begin to think salvation is impossible, God does the impossible. In a world nowadays where people remain bystanders as a woman is brutally murdered, Jesus in his parable imagines a world in which someone is willing to stop and help. In a world where Samaritans and Jews are at each other’s throats, Jesus has the audacity to imagine a Samaritan who is good and binds up the wounds of a Jew.

When we say “thy kingdom come, thy will be done” we should have no illusions. We do not have the ability to bring in the kingdom, even in a small way. No matter how hard we try it won’t work. But, in the scriptures and especially in the life and ministry of Jesus we see a picture of how God’s will is done, what love looks like ... often in spite of what we do.

I suppose we shouldn't be overly critical of the Priest and the Levite who passed by on the other side. There was a practical side to what they did. Getting involved is dangerous. Compassion still carries a risk. But, sometimes, by the grace of God, the unexpected happens. A Samaritan stops to help, and the world is turned upside down.

All this of course is the Gospel, the Good News, which those of us who 'stand 10 feet above contradiction' in this pulpit are called to preach, in season and out of season, when we arrive, when we're in post and when we depart. I hope I have preached the gospel faithfully alongside my colleagues whose particular preaching, I must say, has fed and nurtured my own, and for this I want to give huge thanks. I had really longed for that when I came to Bristol Cathedral and I found it.

However, I firmly believe that the Good News of God's love in action can find its expression in human stories, just like Jesus's parables; stories of faith and compassion that abound in Christian communities – and certainly it's no different in this Cathedral community I am pleased to say. Stories, for example, that you won't all know about..... of little heroes and heroines in our Cathedral Choir. Some of them have overcome enormous odds to sing for us and have enabled us all to draw closer to God in our worship. As we come to the end of the year and you go on your holidays, I want you particularly to hear from your Precentor what a privilege it has been to listen to you, day in, day out, year in, year out and I want to say how proud of you I am, and a heartfelt 'thank you' and 'Well done! You've got it right!' Along with Howells and Stanford and Mozart and Bach who always get it right.

(Phew! I've just got through a potential tearful moment)

But it's not just the children, although of course we know that whoever becomes humble like a child is the greatest in the Kingdom of heaven. It's all of you, each of you having your own story of faith. I've shared with so many of you over the years as you've come to baptism or confirmation or made your communion after a long gap or you've come to a crisis in your life that has brought you to the conclusion that you can't manage without God. All this goes deeper than just casual conversations, doesn't it? We've sat together in hospitals ; in the Chapter Vestry; in my office; over the phone and cried and laughed and worried and prayed. We've talked together in the Chapter House after worship or in the car park after a meeting. We've even got angry together after some of those meetings. We've worked side by side in committees. We've worked together at

wedding services and your baby's baptisms and your parent's funerals. I've had the honour of hearing many of your stories. Stories of hope, of perseverance, of answered prayer, of faith in the midst of unanswered prayer, of living out what you believe by helping others. Your stories are inspiring and moving and an incredible testimony to the love of God in this world. 'Well done! You've got it right!' And thank you for sharing those conversations with me.

So I want to encourage you today to keep telling that story. I think it is true that "We become ourselves as we tell our stories." And after all, that is where God wants us to be.

The Chapter here has spent a fair amount of time thinking about the north west doors and the west doors. It's the same with most PCCs. We have all come to realise that the doors to these great buildings mark that moment when people change 'status' in a sort of way – they come from the world outside where they experience all sorts of different pressures and enter a new 'status' – a place of peace, of mystery, of love and inclusion. Least that's the promise. There will be people coming through those doors who don't know your story, including your next Precentor. And they need to hear it.....not so easy when you are part of a cathedral congregation but not only is it your story, it's God's story. This cathedral has a great story and I have felt honoured to be a part of it these last six and a half years. And when I come to tell my story, you will have a special place in it.

And now, this particular chapter comes to an end. This particular work that we've done together. At the end of a prayer we always say 'Amen'. Amen means "let it be so" or, as they say where I'm going in Yorkshire, "Aye.....'appen!" It's the sort of exclamation point at the end of a sentence that affirms the truth of what's been said and commends it to God.

There's more chapters to come both for you and for me. I know there's still so much more to be done and so much I have left undone, but I'll just have to hand that over to God and say with confidence, trust, faith and so much love, goodbye and Amen.

Canon Wendy Wilby
Precentor January 2006 – July 2103

