

Sermon to St James' Church, King Street, Sydney

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Pentecost 19

(c-os 29)

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"...and Justice for All"

Readings: Jeremiah 31:27-34; Psalm 119:97-104;
2 Timothy 3:10-4:5 Luke 18:1-14.

Henry VIII and Thomas Cromwell

In her historical novel, *Wolf Hall*, Hilary Mantel almost achieved a miracle by getting me to see the likable qualities of Thomas Cromwell, that power-hungry Chancellor of King Henry VIII. Mantel presents Cromwell as a clever, witty and affable family man, whose first concern was to serve his king.

His position was along the lines: "*It was with sadness and much against my will that I disposed of Cardinal Wolsey and Sir Thomas More. I didn't want to do it, but I had to put the will of the king above all other things*". But the cracks in his personality began to show.

Mantel's sequel, *Bring up the Bodies*, however presented a different Cromwell who was more obsessed with power and control. The book describes the demise of Henry VIII's second wife, Anne Boleyn, at Cromwell's hands. Henry had divorced his first wife Catherine and remarried Anne; who was pretty, witty, and promised the possibility of bearing a much-desired son.

It was the combination of Anne's beauty, Henry's libido, and Cromwell's desire for power that laid the path for the later English Reformation. This was because fulfilment of it came through Anne and Henry's daughter, Queen Elizabeth I, who gave birth to the Church of England as we know it – both reformed and catholic.

Mantel describes Henry as having become both frustrated and bored with Anne. They quarrelled, she exercised her own political power, she failed to provide a male heir, and Henry's eyes had strayed to Jane Seymour. The King therefore told Cromwell to 'do whatever is necessary' and Cromwell relished the opportunity to display his power and rid himself of some enemies in the bargain. The result was a legal travesty.

The Queen was accused of adultery, incest and treason; the evidence having been gained through torture, rumour and the testimony of false witnesses. Further, Cromwell accused Anne not only of criminal behaviour but also of criminal thoughts. In other words, and while applying Matthew 5: 28 (but missing the irony) *‘But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart’*. Cromwell sought to find Anne guilty of having had adulterous and treasonous ideas, which he argued were a sign of intent and therefore as damning as any action!

Justice is a basic desire of the human heart that cuts across all history, cultures and religions. The denial, the corruption, or the misrepresentation of justice is a most grievous sin that we can inflict upon others. Likewise, most folk can smell the stink of injustice when it is meted out on the innocent by those in power – be it through the activities of princes, governments, business, the church, or between citizens.

The Widow and the Unjust Judge

The context for today’s Gospel reading is that of Jesus teaching about the Kingdom of God. Before this passage, Jesus had been questioned by some Pharisees (a religious sect of his day), concerning the time when God would come and take over control of the world. Having responded to them, Jesus then turned to his disciples and encouraged them to stand firm in their faith. He told them two morality stories, or parables, to illustrate his message.

The first was about a widow and an unjust judge. The story is of a woman who went to a judge seeking justice, but he ignored her. In the long-run he only attended to her because of her persistence in approaching him, and thereby becoming a pest.

An interesting thing about this parable is that Jesus’ hearers would have probably expected little justice to be afforded the woman, as widows and children had few rights under the law in those times. To be sure, the law did not allow widows to inherit; rather, on the death of a husband, his property passed to his sons or brothers. If those relatives did not act with justice and honour toward the widow, a judge could be called in to mediate.

Many of Jesus’ parables were based on the ‘ways of the world’ and stand in contrast with the ‘ways of God’. In this respect, it is thought that they are based on behaviours and activities that were contemporaneous with Jesus’ world. Indeed, such an ‘unjust judge’ may have been known to his audience. The story therefore served to remind his listeners that injustice is too often the way of the world and that the rule of God is of a different nature. God’s Kingdom is therefore that place where justice is always available and people are treated with respect and love.

The Pharisee and the Tax-Collector

There is a similar sense of ‘truism’ in the story of the Pharisee and the tax-collector. The Pharisee was not acting in any strange way for his own time. Giving thanks to God for divine providence was considered a good thing, however as far as Jesus was concerned it did the Pharisee little good. The tax-collector, however, recognised his need for God and therefore received justification before God.

The Pharisees were a puritan religious group that considered themselves a ‘cut above’ all others because of their scholarship and strict adherence to the law. Their pride was based on believing the right things and doing the right things – that is, the holding of correct doctrine and living pure lives (a type of sinless perfectionism); but it led to spiritual arrogance and hubris. On the other hand, tax-collectors were seen as the worst of the worst types of people in the eyes of the Jews - the equivalent of outsiders, thieves and traitors.

C.S. Lewis wrote in *Mere Christianity* that pride is the greatest sin. He wrote:

"Unchastity, anger, greed, drunkenness, and all that, are mere fleabites in comparison: it was through Pride that the devil became the devil: Pride leads to every other vice: it is the complete anti-God state of mind."

Pride is the problem because it is about putting the ego and the self in the place of God, thereby allowing us to be the judge of others. The Pharisee judged the tax-collector to be of no importance, either to society or to God and therefore he, the Pharisee, could be thankful that ‘he was not like other people’. Such pride is a constant in the human condition and is manifest through tribalism, class consciousness, political struggles, the persecution of minorities, and contempt for the marginalised.

For the Pharisee, it is a sense of entitlement (or perhaps even the insolence of office) that allowed him to despise the faith of others. He believed that he was righteous before God because he kept the law, and therefore viewed others around him with contempt because they did not measure up to his standards. Yet it was the tax collector that came before God with an awareness of his sinfulness and was justified, rather than the Pharisee. What a cautionary tale for us all!

These two parables are reminders of the upside-down world of the Kingdom of God. The unjust judge finally becomes the means to true justice, and the self-righteous Pharisee becomes the focus for religious scorn and condemnation.

The Nature of God's Rule

Today's passage from Jeremiah reminds us:

"The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah... I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people." (Jeremiah 31: 31 & 33b)

This is the nature of the Kingdom of God – a community where all are welcomed, all belong, and all may have a relationship with God. Likewise, it is God's rule in our hearts (rather than in our heads) that will bring justice and respect for all people, no matter who they are. In short, justice is about healthy, loving relationships; it is not about control, retribution or vengeance.

In the Gospel passage Jesus posed a question for his listeners, which is as relevant for us today: "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" Note it is not about 'correct belief' or 'purity', but rather 'faith'. The word in Greek is 'πίστιν' and in this context it emphasises the relational aspect we have with God through prayer. In other words, it is our worship of God that is notable rather than our ideas about God or our perfect behaviour.

The Golden Thread

The ultimate treason toward God is to disregard the needs of others who are created in the image of God – which includes treating them badly, showing no hospitality, and denying justice. To be sure, it is a rejection of the Holy Spirit that dwells within them. In our context, this will also include Aboriginal people, refugees, LGBTQI+ people, the poor, the abused and the homeless.

Queen Anne had become a burden to King Henry because she did not give him what he wanted. It would seem that Henry could not entertain any need but his own – a sign of his ego-centric nature. Anne had become surplus to requirements and therefore needed to be 'let go'. The King (and probably Cromwell too) wanted an heir, and a wife who would be more submissive, and less powerful in herself. This brought about the end of Anne, an end that justified the means by which it was obtained.

An interesting aspect of human nature is to see how we can be pragmatists (bending the law) in the pursuit of our own desires and yet become idealists (rigidly applying the law) in the prevention of others'. But remember this: throughout the web of the Christian faith one golden thread is to be seen and that is: 'to love God with all your heart and to love your neighbour as yourself'.