

Sermon for evensong trinity 22 2020

“Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, ‘If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.’” John 8.31-32

Have you ever noticed that people can be very generous and forgiving right up until their personal prejudice is threatened? Many of us can be extremely precious when our authority is challenged. When our children demand to know why they should do something, and we demand that they obey us; and they then go off and do something we told them not to do; it challenges our authority. When our authority is challenged, we are tempted to yell at them.

When someone who has great power is threatened, or their authority questioned, they are likely to have the challenger removed from any position of influence. Or they protest any action which may encourage others to examine information more closely. When some people are challenged, they will speak of the challenger in disparaging terms and attempt to convince everyone that they are trouble makers or spreaders of misinformation.

My personal experience in a previous appointment for telling the truth and maintaining my own integrity was that my license to function as a priest was rescinded. I threatened the power of the person in charge because I corrected him with the truth. It is something that I would do again without hesitation.

Jesus is facing a similar scenario today. Remember these Jews are the ones who believe in him. We might see them as safe ground. When Jesus says that believing in him will make them free, they ark up. “We are children of Abraham! How dare you suggest that we are not free!”

Their reaction is driven by their history. Their nation has been enslaved in the past. They have been a nation with no country. Their ancestors roamed the desert for forty years or more. They now lived in their own country, albeit under the authority of the Romans.

Jesus is speaking of the freedom to be themselves. He is speaking of not being in bondage to sin. Sin can become the driving force in a life, and Jesus is offering a way in which to put that sin aside, to be forgiven, to be freed from guilt, and to live a life free of that sin.

The Jews have interpreted it as a political insult. They cannot escape so easily. In answer to their claim to be the children of Abraham Jesus suggests that they act like Abraham. The primary quality of Abraham was his obedience to God. It was his faith, his fundamental belief in God, that had Abraham living the life similar to a Nomad. Rather than wandering like a Nomad Abraham was on a journey of certain belief and acceptance. When God spoke to Abraham, he believed and acted.

The Jews as children of Abraham had not listened to God. When Jesus challenged them, they reacted. If they had listened and believed that which Jesus had said their lives would be changed, different, fulfilled. Instead of believing and being obedient they began to plot how they might kill him. His challenge impacted on their perceived identity and personal

authority. So, they set about attacking him, first with words and at the end of the reading they begin to gather stones to use to kill him.

They hurl the most abusive accusation they can muster. "You are a Samaritan, and you have a demon!" I am not sure what might constitute a similar level of insult today. Perhaps being called a "nutcase and a lost cause"; "mad and a waste of space", might be a shadow of the intensity of the insult pointed towards Jesus.

Jesus does not soften his approach when speaking to these people. In straight forward language he explains that he has come from God: that he and the Father work together. Jesus does not set out to glorify himself, but the Father will glorify the Son.

The principle thrust of Jesus accusation is that the Jews cannot accept the truth. It is the truth that brings freedom. It is by standing in the truth that we can look in the mirror each morning and smile. It is the truth that will allow us to sleep soundly at night. Jesus is suggesting in quite strong terms that these Jews do not want to hear the truth.

When we speak of pressing someone's buttons this is an excellent example. The more Jesus explains who he is the more obnoxious the Jews become. His final declaration is that "Before Abraham was, I am." This takes us back to the burning bush that attracted Moses.

Remember the response from God when Moses asked who he should say has sent him into Egypt to set the people free? The answer was very simple. "Tell them I AM sent you to them." This is the nearest we will ever get to a name for God. And this is not a name, but rather a description. Jesus using this title for himself is stating quite plainly that he is God.

Jesus precedes Abraham. Jesus precedes all that exists in our world. All things were made through him.

The Jews could not understand this. All they could see was a man who claimed to be God, and as such was a blasphemer and the Law states quite clearly that he should be put to death. Hence the attempted stoning.

It appears that even though these Jews were classified as believers; as Jews who had accepted and believed that which Jesus had said, they could not put their ego aside when personally challenged.

The question for us is this. How do we respond when someone challenges our authority? How do we respond when someone works out which buttons to press to make us angry? Do we attack, or do we reason? Do we condemn, or do we forgive? Do we stand and fight, or do we turn away and seek our own peace?

How do we respond when we are told lies? Do we stand for truth and integrity, or do we allow evil and deceit to win?

These are rhetorical questions that only we can answer. I would hope and pray that each one of us would be able to discern truth from lies and stand with the truth as offered by our Lord. This is what will set us apart from the Jews in tonight's reading.