

behaviour is communication

a sermon preached on the
eighth sunday after epiphany

3 March 2019

at

st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

by the reverend colleen clayton

the lections: Isaiah 55:10-13; Psalm 92; 1 Corinthians 15: 51-58; Luke 6:39-49

A few weeks ago, I was at Bunnings, wandering, a bit distractedly, down the aisles, looking at all the fascinating things that I didn't need and trying to remember why I was there. Eventually I made it to the checkout. As I stood there a young woman with a baby and a toddler joined the queue behind me. The baby was starting to cry, and mum was trying to calm her. With mum's attention on the little one, the toddler also began to grizzle and was soon throwing a tantrum as mum tried to calm the needs of two distressed children.

It took me straight back to the days when I had small children and the difficulty of trying to understand and meet their needs, often expressed so loudly and forcefully but not always in a way that I found easy to comprehend.

Behaviour, they say, is communication. Although as adults we have words at our disposal and are (hopefully) less inclined to throw tantrums, much of our communication is still non-verbal. We can express our opposition or support, our enthusiasm or disdain, our love or our dislike, very clearly without ever opening our mouths.

Jesus' behaviour, described in the Gospels, communicates to us his strong love for broken, vulnerable humanity as he eats with outcasts, welcomes children, talks to women, weeps over the death of a friend and touches and heals all who come to him. But we also have accounts of Jesus' verbal communication, through parables, debates and sermons like the one from our reading today.

Two Sundays ago, Jesus had just got started on this sermon on the level ground, teaching people about the way in which God's realm redefines blessing and woe; challenging us to reconsider the foundations of our lives in the light of a God whose preference is for the poor and marginalised (Luke 6:17-26). He continued in the Gospel reading set for last week, saying that we must love our enemies, do good to those who hate us, bless those who curse us, and pray for those who abuse us (Luke 6:27-38).

Today, he draws this long sermon to a close with four short illustrations. Jesus begins with the tragi-comedy of the blind leading the blind, and the hyperbole of someone with a log in their own eye trying to remove a speck from the eye of another. He continues, playing with the idea of trees being known by their fruit (grapes are not picked from brambles) and then concludes with the story of the wise and foolish builders (Luke 6:39-49).

Jesus' whole sermon explores the implications for us of how God sees the world. How we see, is reflected in the way in which we act. As those who follow Jesus we are called to see as God sees, and act as God acts. As we do this, our lives will bear fruit that is consistent with God's desires; our behaviour will communicate the message that we have taken into our hearts and we will act with love, compassion and generosity, not judging others because we will remember that our own vision is clouded.

I wonder, have you ever hurt someone you love, only to discover later that the whole thing was based on a misunderstanding? Words spoken or not spoken that assumed far more significance than they should have. Pain caused all around when really there wasn't anything wrong, just a misunderstanding, a different way of seeing. It seems to be so easy to forget the log in our own eyes, to make a judgement about the behaviour of others and to assume that it is their vision that needs correcting.

What Jesus is concerned with is the attitude of our hearts and the behaviour that flows from our hearts. It is very difficult, perhaps impossible, for anyone to have the kind of understanding that would really allow fair judgement of others. God sees the heart and acts with great generosity, understanding and compassion and so we need to learn God's way of seeing; vision that grants mercy and grace to all the other frail human beings who, like ourselves, have need of such gifts.

God's generous behaviour towards us provides the model for our human interactions. Of course, our actions are not the means by which we gain God's generosity (that is simply God's nature) but they are the means by which we strive to align our hearts with God's heart. Behaviour is communication. The actions of our lives speak the truth of our hearts. 'The good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good, and the evil person out of evil treasure produces evil; for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks' (Luke 6:45).

Of course, this is not intended to place the burden of perfection on us. We will all make mistakes and repeat things that we wish never to do again. What is important is that we turn to God for forgiveness and begin again, each day, to shape lives that are constantly in the process of repentance and renewal. Founding our lives in this way will anchor us firmly to God, who will enable us to stand firm, regardless of the storms of life that beat around us.

Last Tuesday I attended my first Post-Ordination Training day. In talking to us about helpful and unhelpful ways of relating in our placements, the speaker reminded us of one of the questions from the Ordinal addressed to those being made deacon.

Will you promote unity, peace and love among all Christian people, especially among those with whom you serve God, encouraging and enabling them to fulfil their ministries?

This question, for me, reflects Jesus' teaching that we are to see as God sees, and act as God acts. We, as deacons, but I think also we as Christians, are to work to shape lives that promote the growth of the gifts of God in each individual heart, so that we can serve God together and bear good fruit. We are to see as God sees.

To speak about a different one of our five senses for a moment, this also means that we are called to listen well to others. For the health of our communities and our relationships we need to learn to listen without colluding in troublemaking but also without condemning the one to whom we are listening.

This is not easy. So often those around us have frustratingly poor eyesight, that is obviously nowhere near as clear and good as our own! Or, when we listen to them, they are talking nonsense and we instantly know what they should do to fix their problems!

But, speaking to us through today's Gospel reading, Jesus insists that we cannot make these judgements. Instead of focussing on what is wrong with others, we must instead shape our lives to bear good fruit; peace, compassion, understanding, generosity. We must give up the desire for control and recognise that even the things that we find irritating can be used by God. Given God's reversal of the ways of the world, it might even be especially through the things that irritate us most that God is at work in our lives.

The prophet Isaiah reminds us that God's word does not return to God without accomplishing its purpose. It does not come back empty but succeeds in the thing for which God sent it. We don't know when, or in what way, God's word will accomplish God's purpose. Our vision is not even good enough to clearly see and understand the behaviour of our fellow human beings. We have absolutely no way of seeing or understanding the way of God because, as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are God's ways higher than human ways and God's thoughts higher than human thoughts (paraphrase of Isaiah 55:9).

Like the loving mother in Bunnings, or our mother God in her dealings with us, we are called to look at each other with eyes of love, and to listen to the message that lies underneath the words. When we can see past the unappealing presentation, or listen beyond the poor delivery, we offer, out of the good treasures of our hearts, the gifts of grace and mercy, the opening up of hope and new possibilities, the turning aside of pain and anger, and the outpouring of God's love.

Amen.