

saving littleness
a sermon preached on the
twentieth sunday after pentecost
2 October 2016
at
st john's
ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL
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the lections: Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4; Psalm 37:1-9, 2 Timothy 1:1-14, Luke 17:1-10

It may appear at first sight that today's gospel consists of nothing but a strange assortment of unrelated bits and pieces: a promise that the way to Jerusalem will involve what the gospel calls *scandalons*;¹ that causing 'little ones' to stumble is a grievous matter of life-threatening proportions;² that forgiveness must have absolutely no limits;³ that the disciples' faith is insufficient;⁴ yet even faith the size of a mustard seed (tiny!) could cause a huge tree to be thrown into the sea;⁵ and that slaves should just get on with their work, without expectation of thanks, let alone reward.⁶

Presented with this curious assortment, it does help to keep in mind that we are 'on the way to Jerusalem'.⁷ We remember that this 'way' is the way of self-emptying: the way of life-in-dying; the way of finding life through losing it;⁸ the way that has been called 'saving littleness'.⁹ So, just remember this: Jesus' way is *saving littleness*.

It's also worth pointing out that those words at the heart of the Christian life, at the centre of the life of the Eucharistic community – 'Remember me' – are the weekly re-centering of our faith. When Jesus says 'Do this to remember me', he is not asking us to think about him, as though he were one of those old friends we have lost touch with.

No, he's saying, don't forget what is the *meaning* of me: saving littleness! For you keep forgetting. You need to un-forget – that's what the Greek literally means.¹⁰ You need to un-forget that I stand for a power which turns the world upside down, which reverses the world's expectations of power.¹¹ I stand for a love in which the pursuit of greatness and acquisition and winning is completely pointless. Look at what I am offering you: my body, my broken, pierced body¹² – which, by the way, is why there's a world of difference between an empty cross and one with a body. See this, he says, this is what that misunderstood word 'messiah' means;¹³ that those who are determined to win will lose, that only those willing to lose can ever win. I'm offering you what you see in my pierced body on the cross; saving littleness.

Well as any person who participates in the Eucharist can appreciate, this is a completely absurd idea; it just won't sell, I'm telling you! It is precisely a *scandalon*, a stumbling stone which the builders (i.e. the powerful, the 'important', the 'religious', and so on) rejected.¹⁴

So the heart of the one thing I ask you to do together – as the community of my disciples – is the un-forgetting of the saving *scandalon*: the evangel of saving littleness; the salvific truth that only those who are willing to lose can ever win. Remember, this is the meaning of me; this is the meaning of 'evangelion', 'gospel'; this is the meaning of being fully human; this is the meaning of the kingdom.

Now when we un-forget this, then we realise that in the gospel context 'little ones' – as the NRSV renders the Greek – does not mean being small in stature, or young in years, nor

¹ Luke 17:1

² Luke 17:2

³ Luke 17:3-4

⁴ Luke 17:5

⁵ Luke 17:6-7

⁶ Luke 17:10

⁷ Luke 9:51

⁸ Luke 9:24, 17:33

⁹ Robert Farrar Capon, *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment: Paradox, Outrage, and Vindication in the Parables of Jesus*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002, p319.

¹⁰ Luke 22:19 ἀναμνησιν *anamnēsin*

¹¹ Luke 1:52

¹² Luke 24:39-40

¹³ Luke 9:20-25, 23:39

¹⁴ Luke 20:17

those who piously abide by rules and regulations in order to keep themselves pure; nor indeed those claiming to have what's sometimes called 'a simple faith'. For as anyone can see, a 'simple faith' which expects Jesus to be a conquering hero – and which expects his Father to manipulate the universe so as to get what it wants – is completely at odds with the faith of the Jesus who 'sets his face to go to Jerusalem'.

Rather, when we remember the truth at the heart of the Eucharist then we see that 'little ones' are those who have freely, joyfully, and hopefully given themselves over to the scandalous saving littleness; those who are finding their life by losing it. The Greek word Luke uses makes it even clearer: **mikrwn mikrōn**. It's the same word Jesus uses to describe the fearful flock, to whom the Father desires to give the kingdom.¹⁵ From the point of view of the world's ideas about power and greatness and success and so on, those who are going the way with Jesus to Jerusalem are truly microns – so tiny as to seem irrelevant.

Now we can see that Jesus' warning about scandalising little ones is a warning to those who have refused his saving littleness – but who claim to be religious and righteous, and whose religion can be oppressive, indeed brutal. Just look at their responses to his offer, and his fierce language to them, in the previous several chapters!¹⁶ And now he cranks the heat up on them even more: it would be better if you were thrown, millstone-necked, into the sea!

This, then, illuminates Jesus' final parabolic teaching in today's gospel fragment. Those who want to make a big deal about their religion – who want to prove their righteousness by their works and accomplishments and piety, by the size of their building, or bank balance, or attendances, or their successful programmes – expect that all their efforts will be rewarded.¹⁷ They figure that they have *deserved* to be rewarded. Self-righteousness, self-promotion, and narcissism are always bedfellows.

But Jesus – with all the politeness of a bull in a china shop – simply likens them to 'worthless slaves'! Because they have refused the evangel, the saving littleness, he offers, refused to be one of God's microns – God's little ones.

And now all is clear: only those who have accepted the scandal of saving littleness can accept Jesus' ridiculous prescription for unlimited forgiveness; only those who have given themselves over to this saving littleness can see that the faith they have is indeed something on the micron scale; and that the micron scale of saving littleness is more than enough!

Something tiny, *micron*, is enough! Can you hear that? Do you get it?

I know, I do realise, that it's almost impossible for we inheritors of Christendom – not to mention our centuries of capitalism, consumerism, competition, and individualism – to accept the absurd gospel of Jesus, that something tiny is enough. Who can accept it!

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¹⁵ Luke 12:32

¹⁶ Luke 11:42-52

¹⁷ Luke 17:9