



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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A Sermon for the Thirteenth Sunday After Trinity St. Luke 10:23-37 & Galatians 3:16-22

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Jesus had commissioned seventy disciples to preach the good news throughout the cities and towns of Israel and when they came back to him they were excited. Wherever the good news went, amazing things happened. Above everything else, the seventy rejoiced that at the name of Jesus, even demons obeyed. And Jesus rejoiced with them. “I know,” he said. This is what the prophets foretold. Isaiah and Ezekiel told of their visions in which the Satan fell like lightning from heaven. It’s happening now. God’s kingdom is breaking in, God’s light is driving away the darkness, and it is toppling the rulers of this present evil age—and you’re a part of it. And with that in mind Jesus said to them, “Don’t rejoice that spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.”

Having your name written in heaven—that meant being written in God’s great book that you belong to him, that you are one of his people. And Jesus draws a connection here that I don’t think we really emphasises often enough and that’s that God’s people are marked out in the present by their kingdom priorities and their kingdom life.

Jesus is hinting here—actually, I think it’s more than just a hint—that in him, the God of Israel was renewing Israel and creating a new people. Because the Jews already believed their names were written in heaven, but Jesus hints that something is changing. That it’s not just about being the biological children of Abraham or about keeping *torah*, but that it’s now connected with this good news and with him—with the Messiah. The long-awaited age to come, the age when the Lord would judge the wicked

and set the world to rights, in Jesus the Messiah it was breaking in as the prophets had foretold. And so Jesus—and these are the first words of our Gospel today beginning at Luke 10:23—Jesus turns from the crowd to his disciples and says to them, “Blessed are the eyes that see what you see. Let me tell you, many prophets and kings wanted to see what you see, and they didn’t see it; and to hear what you hear, and they didn’t hear it.”

But then, Luke says, a lawyer got up and put Jesus on the spot. He knew what Jesus was saying and it really bothered him. Because everyone knew that God’s people are marked out in the present by their keeping of the law: by things like circumcision, sabbath-keeping, and diet. Maybe Jesus was the Messiah, maybe God’s kingdom was breaking in, but this suggestion that Jesus’ disciples had their names written in heaven because they were somehow connected with Jesus—that they were “in”—well, that meant that others were “out”. So the lawyer stood up and shouted at Jesus, “Rabbi, what should I do to inherit the life of the age to come?” He was sure his name was written in heaven, but if Jesus was calling that into question, he wants to know what criteria Jesus thinks mark God’s people out in the present. Was Jesus really excluding good, *torah*-observing Jews like him?

And Jesus, as is the way with rabbis, responded with another question: “What is written in the law?” And it’s easy to imagine the exasperation on the lawyer’s face as he answered the question they’d all learned the answer to as little children: “You shall love the Lord your with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength, and all your understanding; and your neighbour as yourself.”

And Jesus responded, “Well said! Do that and you will live.” The lawyer frowned and grit his teeth. No, no, no. If that’s what it’s about, then we’re all on the same page, but Jesus is clearly saying that his disciples will see the age to come and that others might not. The lawyer wants to know how or where Jesus is drawing the line. Who’s in and who’s out? More than that, he knows

Jesus is wrong and he wants to get his error, his heresy out into the open for everyone to see. So he throws out another question, “Ah! But who is my neighbour?”

“And Jesus rose to the challenge. ‘Once upon a time,’ he said, ‘a man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and was set upon by brigands. They stripped him and beat him and ran off leaving him half-dead.’”

Everyone knew the road. Very soon Jesus would be travelling it himself, going the other direction, *up to* Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover—and to become the new Passover himself. That road was steep and windy and notorious for the brigands hiding in wait for unwary travellers. The wise travelled in groups or well-armed. Travelling it alone, like this man did, was foolish. This lawyer, listening to Jesus, would be shaking his head and thinking to himself that anyone dumb enough to travel that road alone was a candidate for a Darwin Award.

But Jesus goes on. “A priest happened to be going down that road, and when he saw him he went past on the opposite side.” Now, you and I shake our heads and think, “What a horrible priest! How could he not stop to help the man.” But we only think that way because we’ve been shaped by the gospel and by Jesus and the Spirit. The cross of Jesus has taught us mercy. That God would not only humble himself, but would shed his blood on behalf of his rebellious children has taught us mercy in a way never understood before the gospel. But that lawyer—and the crowd and maybe even Jesus’ disciples—they lived in the dark world on the other side of the good news of the cross. They saw nothing wrong with this priest passing by the man. The priests kept themselves ritually pure. They had to in order to enter the temple. Even though this priest is going in the opposite direction—probably on his way home from serving his rotation in the temple—he still kept himself pure. He couldn’t tell if the man was dead or alive and if went over, rolled him over, and found him dead, well, then he’d be impure. That was okay for normal people, but not for a priest. And

everyone knew this. And, again, no one had a problem with it.

“Then,” said Jesus, “a Levite came by the place. He saw him too and went past on the opposite side.” He might not be a priest, but being a Levite, he too served in the temple. Again, he’s going the opposite way—like the priest, he’s probably on his way home from serving in the temple. But, still, being a Levite, he can’t chance becoming impure. And, again, this was all normal and good and right as far as most people were concerned.

“But then,” said Jesus, “a travelling Samaritan came to where he was.” Everyone frowned at this. Samaritans were filth. They were the Jews who intermarried with the native Canaanite peoples when the people of Judah were in exile. They worshiped at their own illicit temple at Shechem and they compromised *torah* with pagan practises and pagan philosophy. They were traitors of the worst kind. Just being on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho meant he was fouling the promised land with his impure Samaritan feet. And yet, Jesus said, “He came over to the man and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put him on his own beast, took him to an inn, and looked after him. The next morning, as he was going on his way, he gave the inn-keeper two dinars. ‘Take care of him,’ he said, ‘and on my way back I’ll pay you whatever else you need to spend on him.’”

“Where’s Jesus going with this?” Everyone was thinking. “What’s his point?” There’s no way this would happen in real life. But that’s kind of the point. Jesus looks the lawyer in the eye and asks, “Which of these three do you think turned out to be the neighbour of the man who was set upon by the brigands?” Jesus is going make the lawyer come out and say it. And the lawyer does, because there’s no escape for him. “The one who showed mercy on him,” he said.

“Well,” Jesus said to him, “you go and do the same.”

So what just happened? Jesus brilliantly turned the prophecy of Isaiah 6:1-11 into a parable. I don’t think anyone figured that out until the lawyer answered the final question and said “The one who showed him...*mercy*.” And as soon as that word “mercy” was out of his mouth, I expect it sank in. Hosea 6 is where the Lord, through the Prophet, rebukes the people of Israel because their love for God is “like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes early away.” It’s the prophecy in which Hosea accuses the priests of acting violently against the helpless saying, “As robbers lie in wait for a man, so the priests band together; they murder on the way to Shechem; they commit villainy” (6:9). The Prophet denounces the “evil deeds of Samaria” (7.1). And that’s why Jesus puts a Samaritan in the centre of his story. It flips everything around. As Jesus tells it, it’s now the people of Judah, and especially the priests and Levites who are acting violently against the people. This is why, when Jesus cleanses the temple he condemns the priests for having made it a “den of robbers”. As the unfaithful northern kingdom of Israel had been judged by the Lord, so judgement is now barrelling towards Judah and Jerusalem and the temple and its priests. The Lord is indeed, in Jesus, preparing to judge the wicked and to set the world to rights. The long-awaited age to come is breaking in. As the Lord promised through Hosea, he will come to heal his people, to bind up their wounds, to revive them after two days, and to raise them up on the third day (6:1-2). But whom will he heal and revive and raise up? Whom will he take with him into the age to come? The answer: Only those who share his values and his priorities and the values and priorities of the age to come. In Hoses 6:6 the Lord declares those well-known words, “I want mercy and not sacrifice, and knowledge of God rather than whole burnt offerings.” I want mercy. And I think those well-known words of the Prophet came crashing down on that lawyer like a metaphorical ton of bricks as he gave his answer and said, “The one who showed him *mercy*.”

There was no mercy in the heart of the priest and no mercy in the heart of the Levite—and there was no mercy in the hearts of the people of Judah who saw nothing wrong with the priest and the Levite leaving the man to die. For that matter there was no mercy in the hearts of people who saw the Samaritans as unredeemable, reprobate scum. And that was the heart of the problem. And that was the problem that Jesus came to fix. Because the only people who will have a share in the age to come—in the kingdom of God—are the people who share the values and priorities of God. The people who are poor in spirit, who mourn the state of the world, the meek, the people who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the pure in heart, the peacemakers—and the merciful.

Everyone wants to see evil judged and removed from the earth and everyone wants to be part of the age to come when God has set everything to rights, but very few want—or even recognise their need—to first be transformed by the life of that kingdom. Like so many in Judah, we want to enter the age to come as we are. We don’t want to change. As much as we want to see everything made right, we still hold tightly to the very things, the very values, the very systems, the very sins, the very gods that have made the world the mess it is. And we can be relentlessly unmerciful in our condemnation of everyone else we don’t think meets our standards. We can be relentlessly unmerciful to everyone we think is the problem. All while forgetting that we’re *all* the problem. We’ve all contributed to the mess the world is in and if God were to set the world to rights and then transplant us into it as we are, well, we’d just ruin it all over again—because we’re the problem—every last one of us.

But when we let go of it all. When we take hold of Jesus in faith as Messiah, as the one who died and rose again triumphant over sin and death, he not only washes our sinful past away, he also plunges us into the Spirit, into the very life of God. And in doing that, Jesus makes us fit for the life of the age to come. Not instantly, of course. It’s a

process. But through word and Spirit he makes us new bit by bit, just as he does the same with this world as he sends us out with his good news to spread his kingdom bit by bit until one day the knowledge of the glory of the Lord covers the earth as the waters cover the sea. One day that glory will fill us to—like the blood that courses through us from head to toe—and we’ll be fit for the kingdom.

And because of that, Jesus’ people should be known for having a wide view of God’s mercy. That’s what the people of the northern kingdom lacked when the Lord warned them through Hosea that he desired mercy above sacrifice. And it’s what the people of Judah lacked when Jesus told his parable about the good Samaritan. Maybe instead of calling it the “Parable of the Good Samaritan” we should really call it the “Parable of the Unmerciful Priest and Levite”. In both cases, the people of Israel and the people of Judah, they of all people, should have had a sense of the Lord’s mercy. This is where our Epistle today, beginning at Galatians 3:16, can help us understand. St. Paul stresses God’s promise to Abraham and how it was fulfilled in the family of the Messiah—this people made up of both Jews and gentiles.

Paul writes in Galatians 3:16, “The promises were made to Abraham and his seed”—that is, his family. It doesn’t say ‘his seeds,’ as though referring to several families, but indicates a single family by saying ‘and to your seed,’ meaning the Messiah.” There was a group of Jewish Christians in the Galatian churches that were pushing for Gentile believers to be circumcised and, at least superficially, to keep the *torah* and Paul’s letter to them is a rebuke and an exhortation. On the one hand he rebukes them for falling backwards into *torah* and on the other hand he exhorts them to press forward by *faith* in Jesus the Messiah, because it’s *faith*, not observance of the law that marks out the people of God. Abraham had no *torah*. He just had *faith* in the promises of God. *Torah*, the law, that came hundreds of years later. The law, Paul writes, was a good thing, but temporary—like a

babysitter meant to keep the Jewish people out of trouble until God’s promises were fulfilled through them in Jesus. Why? Because they were the unique people, called and set apart by God—*by faith*, Paul stresses—to *carry God’s promises to the nations*. In light of that, they should have remembered all along that God’s plan was to redeem not just Israel, but all of humanity. And knowing that, they should have been a people with a heart for the lost and a people of mercy.

Brothers and Sisters, it is an awful thing when people who have themselves experience and known the amazing mercy of God become unmerciful. The Lord rebuked Israel and Judah for their lack of mercy, but it’s even more awful when we who have known God’s mercy through Jesus fall into unmerciful patterns. Maybe we become self-righteous. Maybe we become jaded and cynical. But whatever form it takes, we sinners who have known the amazing mercy of God through the blood of Jesus poured out at the cross, we outsiders who have known the amazing mercy of God by being grafted into the vine of Israel, we who were dead who have been filled with God’s own Spirit, we have no business being unmerciful. To the contrary, because of the great mercy we have known ourselves, rivers of mercy ought to be flowing from us to the world.

But, somehow, our eyes fall. Instead of looking up, we look down. Instead of keeping our eyes focused on Jesus, we’re distracted by the things around us. Like the guests in another of Jesus’ parables, we’re invited to his great feast, but we have excuses: I’ve bought this parcel of land and I need to go have a look at it; I’ve bought a yoke of oxen, and I need to go collect them; I’ve just got married, and well... I can’t come. The systems, the philosophies, the values, the gods of the old age that is passing away—the things we once forsook for Jesus—entice us back. Maybe it’s the troubles and trials of life that cause us to lose perspective and doubt Jesus and to doubt God’s faithfulness. Whatever it is, we take our eyes off of Jesus and we begin to stray

and we begin to lose hope—like someone shuffling along a mountain trail with his eyes on his shoes, missing the glory to be seen all around. And to us Paul practically shouts, “Look up!” (That’s Colossians, not Galatians, but it doesn’t matter.) Look up! You’ve been raised with the Messiah, so set your sights on things above, where Jesus sits at the right hand of God. That’s what should mark out the people of God. And as we look up, as we find our hope in Jesus, as we find our identity in Jesus, mercy flows. The Spirit’s fruit grows. And we don’t just pray “on earth as in heaven”, but we become the “on earth as in heaven” people. That’s what the people of Israel should have been in Hosea’s day. That’s the Priest and the Levite and the lawyer and all those other people in Judah should have been in Jesus day. Thanks be to God that he gave his son to set them to rights and to make it possible for us, by faith, to be grafted into that family. And so that’s what we ought to be too. On earth as in heaven people. Brothers and Sisters, the Lord invites us to his Table this morning, once again to participate in the great exodus in which Jesus, by his blood, has led us out of our bondage to sin and death. Come to the Table and know again his mercy. Eat the bread and drink the wine and know the goodness, the graciousness, the lovingkindness, the faithfulness of our God. Then, renewed with a send of his glory, go out and take heaven, take his glory with you to the world.

Let’s pray: Almighty and merciful God, by whose gift alone your faithful people offer you true and laudable service: Grant that we may run without stumbling to obtain your heavenly promises; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*