

Lent Compline Talks 2017

Faith in and at Work

St Mary's Kidlington

Holy Week Monday, 10th April

Prof John Morris

Administrators

This week, in this series of short addresses on work and faith, I want us to think about administrators – not you might think the most likely of subjects for a compline address. The administrators I want us to think about are Joseph in the Old Testament, and Pontius Pilate and two tax-officials Matthew and Zacchaeus in the New Testament.

It is the end of the story of Joseph that I want us to concentrate on. You'll remember the early part of the story. Joseph, the youngest and favourite son of his old father Israel (who had made him the long-sleeved coat of many colours) had antagonised his elder brothers by his self-promoting dreams. The elder brothers were very jealous, and when they had the chance stripped him of his fancy coat, threw him into a pit, from where he was sold to a caravan of Ishmaeli merchants on their way to Egypt with a caravan of balm and myrrh. In Egypt he was bought by Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh's guard, was imprisoned after Potiphar's wife tried to seduce him, but then, because of his ability to interpret dreams, became famous and was freed. His ability brought him to the attention of the Pharaoh for whom he interpreted Pharaoh's dreams as signifying years of plenty followed by a famine. He became a chief administrator, giving wise advice on the steps that should be taken to reduce the effects of the up-coming famine, which proved entirely successful, such that "the whole world came to Egypt to buy corn from Joseph" He brought his father and his brothers and their flocks to Egypt during the famine, where they not only survived but prospered. But it is the last part of the story, not often read in church, that I want us to take note of this evening, and it comes after Joseph's father died and had been buried. At this point the brothers began to worry and said to themselves 'What if Joseph should still bear a grudge against us for the wrong that we did him, but did not act for love of his father" So they went to Joseph and told him that, in his last words before he died, Jacob had given them a message for Joseph asking him to forgive the brother's wickedness "for we are servants of your father's God". On hearing this Joseph wept and said "Don't be afraid; you certainly meant to do me harm, but God meant to bring good out of your sin by enabling me to save the lives of innumerable people during this famine" And he promised to provide for them and their families.

Here we have a number of thought-provoking points. First, that even a really brutal human crime (such as allowing one of your family to be sold into slavery) can apparently be used by God to bring good to many and, second, that a really skilful administrator, whose care is only to do the right thing for the future, can be God's chosen vessel for good. Today, we don't often hear good things said about administrators – they are often portrayed as seeking to increase their own power base; getting sacked from one job in which they have made a mess, and moving on to another with some sort of golden handshake. The story of Joseph tells us not only to be generous even when we have every reason to feel we have been wronged, but also that thoughtfully caring for the lives of other people is part of the work of God.

In the New Testament let's think first about Pilate – according to Roman sources the very antithesis of a good administrator; but someone from whom we can still learn – if only what to avoid. Pilate was the fifth prefect of the Roman province of Judea, which included Samaria and Ideumea from AD26-36, appointed by the Emperor Tiberias. A prefect's primary function was

military, but prefects were also responsible for the collection of imperial taxes and had limited judicial functions – the rest being in the hands of local officials (in Judea the Sanhedrin and its president, the high priest, who was actually appointed by Pilate). Pilate lived in Caesarea, but travelled round, often to Jerusalem, and especially at times of religious festivals when he was expected to keep order. He started off his rule in Judea offending the religious leaders by bringing images and effigies on their standards into Jerusalem, and continued by setting up gold-coated shields honouring Tiberias; he purloined money from the temple to build an aqueduct, and was said by Roman writers to be “vindictive, inflexible, a blend of self-will and relentlessness”. Finally, he was sent back to Rome by his boss, the Roman Governor of Syria, to account for his many crimes, but particularly a massacre of Samaritans worshipping on mount Gerizim.

Perhaps surprisingly, then, the four gospels portray him in a rather more positive light, even if weak and able to be swayed by a crowd, all of which seems unlikely. I’ve mentioned before that some scholars believe that this is because the gospel writers were trying to curry favour with Rome, where Christianity was growing. Be that as it may, all the gospels have Pilate finding Jesus innocent of all the charges against him and being reluctant to acquiesce to Jesus’s execution – even to the extent of offering the Jews a choice between Jesus and Barabbas, a well know criminal, and finally trying to wash his hands of his guilt in their choice.

So what can we learn from Pilate? From the more historical perspective, only what behavior to avoid; but, from the gospel narratives, that we must not listen to the insistent voices of a vociferous crowd bent on doing wrong; and that no amount of hand-washing physical or metaphorical will absolve us when, through weakness, we fail to do what we honestly believe to be the right thing.

The other administrators we come across in the New Testament are tax-collectors. The first is probably one of the gospel writers – Matthew. Matthew was among the earliest followers of Jesus. He was apparently a Galilean like the fishermen we considered yesterday, and we must remember that Galilee was not part of the Roman province of Judea, but under the jurisdiction of Herod Antipas. Matthew was apparently ‘sitting at the seat of custom’ in Capernaum when he was called to follow Jesus, which he did, immediately and without question. There is some uncertainty as to whether he is the same as the tax-collector named Levi in Mark and Luke, and the same as the Matthew who is listed as one of the twelve disciples and apostles. Certainly the Talmud lists a “Mattai” as one of the five disciples of “Jeshu”. Whatever his identity, Matthew the tax collector would certainly have been literate in both Aramaic and Greek and hence is a good candidate as a gospel writer. However, as a collector of taxes from the Hebrew people for Herod Antipas, who was effectively a puppet ruler for the occupying Romans, he would have been despised by most of his fellow Jews for what was seen as collaborating with the Roman occupation. He was clearly also well off because after his call we read that Matthew invited Jesus home for a feast. The hostility of other Jews and particularly the religious leaders is clear from their criticism of Jesus for accepting the invitation; “this fellow eats with tax-collectors and sinners”. Which prompted Jesus’ response “I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance”

So, like the fishermen we considered yesterday – what an apparently curious choice for one of Jesus’ chosen disciples! Tax collectors were seen as both cheats and traitors by the Jews. But follow Jesus he did (like the fishermen, just leaving their previous working life) and Matthew is listed as one of the witnesses of the Resurrection and Ascension, after which it is thought that he went on to preach the Gospel to the Jewish community in Judea.

Our second tax collector is Zacchaeus, who Jesus met when he was visiting Jericho. He was said to be the chief tax collector and very wealthy – doubtless because at time, there was always the opportunity for a tax-collector to take a proportion of the taxes for himself. Being short, he climbed a sycamore tree to get a view of Jesus amid the following crowd. Whereas it was Matthew who invited Jesus to his house, this time it is Jesus who sees Zacchaeus and calls out to him, “come down at once, I must stay at your house today” Again, there was the same critical response to the assembled Jews “He has gone to be the guest of a sinner” But Zacchaeus said “Look Lord, Here and now I give half my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody, I will pay back four times the amount” to which Jesus responded “Today salvation has come to this house, for the Son of Man came to seek and save the lost”. Whether Zacchaeus went on to be a disciple of Christ we can never know, but the message for us from the two tax collectors is clear. If we want to follow our Lord, we must do something that we instinctively find very difficult – that is to go to those in our society who are the most despised, those whom we consider least likely to be receptive to Jesus message. And why, because an encounter with Jesus can literally be life-changing for them as it should be for us.