

Becoming Unwrapped

Pentecost 16 – 2nd October 2011

Readings:

Matthew 21: 33-46

This morning we have heard the Ten Commandments read to us, and for many years I used to believe that to be a good boy all I needed to do was to obey them. And like some kind of theological auditor, I could count them off. Well of course I believe in one God and I don't hanker after other gods, if you don't count football. And I certainly don't use God's name in vain, though for God's sake, what does that really mean? And I was brought up Catholic and missing church on Sunday was always a mortal sin. You see I equated going to church on Sunday with keeping holy the Sabbath day. Honouring my mother and father - no problem apart from a short time in my adolescence. And I've never killed anybody in my life. And as far as adultery is concerned, no chance - Jenny would kill me. And as for stealing, lying and coveting, well I was brought up differently, but besides sometimes it's not stealing if you're redistributing wealth. And sometimes you lie to shield someone from the truth. And as far as coveting is concerned, isn't that what makes the world go round. It is at the heart of our capitalist society.

So no, I pretty good. No problems with the Ten Commandments - just don't look at them too closely.

That's what I used to believe. But increasingly I have begun to think like Jesus. Perhaps these anti-sin measures distract us from an underlying sin.

For that reason when I say the Lord's Prayer nowadays, heretically, I never pray "forgive us our sins" but always "forgive us our **sin**." You see as Jesus pointed out so many times to his disciples and the Scribes and Pharisees, connection with God was never a matter of keeping to the letter of the law. And whilst any law code is a good start, it is imposed externally when what is needed is a change of heart, which is always internal.

So when I pray 'forgive us our sin', there is only one that counts as far as I'm concerned, and it's separation, separation from God and separation from God's creation, that always includes my neighbour. Augustine and Luther had a similar take on sin. They used the words "being wrapped up in oneself", and perhaps that's what I'm talking about. When I am wrapped up in myself - I find it hard to care for others. It's me that counts and God, the planet and others come a far second, and perhaps that's the real sin of our age. Cutting ourselves off from others - trying to go it alone. Trying to be God.

So when Matthew has Jesus tell his parable about the tenants in the vineyards he is doing more than making an allusion of how the Pharisees and Scribes have ignored the owner of the vineyard and turned on God's only Son.

And perhaps this parable is going to the heart of what sin is about. The tenants want it all. So they attack the son in hope of owning the vineyard. They become so wrapped up in

themselves that owner doesn't count, his slaves don't count. Even his son doesn't count. It's all about us - the tenants.

Now some commentators would claim this parable is for the Scribes and Pharisees, and say that Jesus is only having a go at their exclusivist tendencies. But surely there is a temptation for all us religious people, a temptation to pretend the vineyard is ours, the church is ours. So we build edifices that become more important than the One we say we follow.

We see it down through the centuries in the Church, where the tenants of the vineyard, the religious leaders, seek to protect their power and formulate rules that exclude. They seek the inheritance that is not rightly theirs. The temptation is always to become wrapped up in ourselves. But Jesus repeatedly tells his disciples that the first shall be last and the last first. He talked about losing one's self, one's ego, to find one's true self. And then there is blessed be the poor, blessed be the meek, blessed be those who have lost what is most dear to them, for it is to such as these that the vineyard belongs.

Jesus the Christ, always turns the power structure upside down. And when we believe and act as if it is Christ's church and not ours to protect and defend, it is then we are most Christ-like. But far too often we act as if it is our vineyard, our church, and become addicted to power and control.

So I'd like to share a story with you about this great sin of ours, and perhaps in the telling help us find a way out of our great sin:

The story is called "The Water of Life" and is found in John Shea's "The Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels". Like the parable of the vineyard it too is a parable for the Church:

The water of life, wishing to make itself known on the face of the earth, bubbled up in an artesian well and flowed without effort or limit. People came to drink of this refreshing water, and were nourished by it, since it was so clean and pure and invigorating.

But humankind was not content to leave things in this Edenic state. Gradually they began to fence off the well, charge admission, claim ownership of the property around it, make elaborate laws as to who could come to the well, and put locks on the gates. Soon the well was the property of the powerful and elite.

The water was angry and offended; it stopped flowing and began to bubble up in another place. The people who owned the property around the first well were so engrossed in their power systems and ownership that they did not notice that the water had vanished. They continued selling the non-existent water and few people noticed that the true power was gone.

Some dissatisfied people searched with great courage and found the new artesian well. But soon that well came under the control of the property owners and the same fate overtook it.

The spring took itself to another place – and this has been going on throughout history.

We don't own the vineyard, we work in it. When we want it all, we inherit nothing. For after all it is the poor in spirit that inherit the kingdom of God and the meek that inherit the earth, not those who are wrapped up in themselves.

This is the message of the Christ, and it needs to be the message of the Church. Continually dying to self so that Christ can live in us.

So as we come to this time of communion, this time of connection with the Christ and with each other, may we unwrap our egos and offer them to the God, so that we may truly become Christ Body on earth.

So God help me unwrap:

**The narrowness of vision and of mind,
the need for other folks to serve my will
and every word and silence meant to hurt,
these I lay down.**

**Of those around in whom I meet my Lord
I ask their pardon and I grant them mine,
that every contradiction to God's peace
might be laid down.**

AMEN

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