

Sermon for online worship on Sunday 12 September, by Melanie Seward

Readings: Exodus 18: 13- 26 and Matthew 7:1-14

A challenge to us all



Every now and then the Guardian includes an article headed 'Ten of the best....' It can be anything about music, film or literature and has included Rihanna's chart music, Daphne du Maurier films, the best Shakespeare characters and the best rappers. The idea is a great one. I find it a much better experience than opening a newspaper or pressing a webpage link and reading an article on 'Ten of the worst'!

In real life, and actual moments, we have the same choice: we can focus on the worst or the best; we can focus on the avoidance of problems or fix our eyes on solutions; we can choose to build on the positives and in doing so work with the weaknesses.

In the book of Exodus, we have a wonderful picture of Moses working flat-out, all day every day, to solve the individual disputes of a whole community - not surprisingly, his family are still living with his father-in-law, Jethro. Jethro arrives and he might well have said - Have you got no sense at all? You can't carry on with this leadership thing - it's doing you no good at all. Or he could have leapt in and said - you've got it all wrong, what you need to do is this... But Jethro does neither, instead he talks with his son-in-law.

He starts with - tell me about how are you doing? Then he thinks about Moses (and probably his family); Jethro shows his concern for the younger man and shares his worry - you will wear yourself out Moses. Then he affirms Moses' priority and ability to teach the people in God's ways.

Finally, Jethro offers a solution; how about you choose faithful, trustworthy and able people whom you can teach and then delegate all minor disputes and that will free you to deal with the more complex and difficult disputes - as well as give you space to take care of yourself and serve God in this capacity for longer.

Jethro is thinking of Moses rather than asserting his own way of doing things; he shares his understanding, he is enabling rather than controlling, and avoids being judgemental in any way.

Chapter seven, verse one of Matthew's Gospel is often quoted and misused to silence criticism. 'Well... it does say in the Bible that we should not judge others...'. I'm sure we have heard this and probably we have all said it at some time

Jesus was not saying that we should not think about how we need to act to be faithful to God's calling or saying that we should keep silent whatever is said or happens.

Jesus **is** very concerned with the way we pick up on the wrongs and weaknesses of others and conveniently ignore or pay lip service to addressing our behaviour. Hence, we read in verse three, 'Why do you see the speck in your neighbour's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?'

Yet Jesus does say, 'Do not judge, so that you may not be judged.' (verse two) 'For with the judgement you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get.'

Rather than describing the nature of God and what he wants for us as individuals, Jesus is saying the approach of being judgemental with others leads to us all living in a community where we are judgemental with one another. And that this is not only sinful but that this way of living leads us to rejecting God's offer of forgiveness and a life that is abundant with hope and love.

God's nature is not judgemental, he asks that we recognise our flaws but out of his grace offers us a new life that is characterised by love for him and others.

God is not a God who is constantly looking for our specks and logs. God is ready to forgive and to work with the imperfect us; he wants to build us up not put us down. And we are called to be the same in our relationships with others: to build up and not put down.

There will be times when we will be called to discern what is living faithfully and what is not living faithfully, but how we respond must always seek to transform and build relationships. Of course, this does not extend to putting ourselves as individuals at great risk. Such discernment to remove oneself from a situation or a relationship is not the same as judging them to be unworthy of the Good News of Jesus Christ or deciding that they are beyond God's saving grace.

What I'm talking about is the challenge Jesus is extending to all of us to walk or live in his Way. This Way is not about being judgemental towards individuals, groups or nations. Jesus challenges us as personalities, as a church, a town and a country. This section of Matthew's Gospel ends with:

'Enter through the narrow gate, for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.'

(Matthew 7. 13-14)

This is not about signing up to a set of beliefs or joining the right club, but about walking the path of Jesus that leads to light and life. We are called to be people who are transformed by God's love and in turn to transform the world around us.

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