

Trinity XVI

27 September 2020

**Readings: Ezekiel 18: 1-4, 25-32; Psalm 25: 1-8; Philippians 2: 1-13;
Matthew 21: 23-32**

In the story of the two sons that Jesus tells to the chief priests and elders we see how one son simply paid lip service to his father by his telling his father that he would go and work in his father's vineyard, but then not doing so. We also see how the other son, the one who initially told his father he would not work in the vineyard, had a change of heart and actually did go and do the work. In what I'm going to say to you today I'd like to focus on this idea of a change of heart. In our first lesson God speaks through Ezekiel saying, 'Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed against me, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit!' (Ezekiel 18: 31).

How do we get a new heart and a new spirit? What is it that enables us to have a change of heart? I think the answer lies in our second lesson, a magnificent passage from Paul's letter to the Philippians. In this letter Paul describes how Jesus 'emptied himself' of his equality with God to take on all that pertains to being a human being. God in Jesus did this on account of God's love for us. If we take this further, we might say that love, which as we know is the very essence of God, involves a sort of emptying, in that it involves a giving from one to another. We could apply this to God's creation of all that is by saying that the act of creation was a kind of emptying. In his love and concern for humanity God is constantly opening himself to us, constantly giving to us. Love involves a continual concern for others.

Love is modelled in the very makeup of God. Within the heart of God there is a constant flow of love between the Father and the Son, a constant giving and receiving of love. The Holy Spirit is actually the spirit of love that flows between Father and Son and from them down to us.

I wonder if what we call 'coming to faith' is simply a way of describing our discovery that the self-giving love of God is the truth at the heart of all that is. As Christians we believe that this self-giving love is best shown us in the love of Jesus. But this love was always there throughout the Old Testament exemplified in the Old Testament God's concern for justice and peace

Jesus, although divine, did not seek to lord it over others. He came among us in the form of a humble man from the backwoods region of Galilee. Although he had time for everyone, rich and poor, his first concern was the lost and the rejected.

Jesus was also always in relationship with others, just as he was always in

relationship with the Father, for love means being in relationship with other people. Consider how he travelled about, not alone but in the company of his disciples.

Paul was profoundly affected by this idea of Jesus' self-giving love. In today's passage from Philippians he quotes in verses 6-11 what most scholars believe was an early Christian hymn. These verses were no doubt meant to inspire the early Christians to follow Jesus' example, to empty themselves of greed, selfishness, hard-heartedness, and self-righteous pride and take on the humble, self-giving love of Christ. I wonder if Paul used it as a sort of mantra to remind him of Jesus' example of love.

Such love will always conflict with the things of this world. This self-emptying love took Jesus to the cross. It can and will take us to hard places. And yet we know that this love will also take us to the new life of Easter. Whenever we seek to love as Jesus loves, we can experience something of Easter.

If we take Jesus as our pattern, then we should see that just as he emptied himself to be with us, so we, through the grace of God can empty ourselves of our selfishness to become more loving, more like Jesus. Just as a loving relationship between two people will grow and actually enable a kind of transformation to take place as their relationship grows, so our relationship with God can enable a transformation in us. But for that transformation to happen we need to be engaged in love with others, for God usually works with us through other people.

And so I come back to that question I voiced earlier about how we can have a change of heart. I think it is simply through trusting in the truth of the love we see in Jesus. Trusting that it really is a love that will never let us go, despite our continual failings. For if we think about it, striving to love as Jesus loved is a pretty daunting task. Finding our way through all the often conflicting calls on our love is not easy. Quelling our innate selfishness is not easy.

We can, however, rest on the knowledge that 'all things work together for good for those who love God' (Romans 8: 28). If we look to God we can find through him a new heart every day. We can, in other words, change our minds for the good.

Charles Brown