

## Forgiveness. 21/3/21

There is a history in all men's lives  
Figuring the nature of the times  
deceased,  
The which observed, a man may  
prophecy,  
With a near aim, of the main chance  
of things  
As yet not come to life, which in  
their seeds  
And weak beginnings lie  
intreasured.

Henry the Fourth, Part 2; Act 3; Scene1;  
words spoken by the Earl of Warwick to the  
king.

Shakespeare is not always easy to fathom, but  
is usually worth the effort. Here, if we take  
to start, the first two lines; 'There is a history

in all men's lives figuring the nature of the  
times deceased...' which means that we can all  
have stories, looking back over past times,  
from which we can attempt to deduce what  
the future may hold for us. How did that  
conversation go? That meeting, that meal, the  
meander with your friend - was it fruitful,  
positive, companionable? Or did it leave you  
feeling anxious, uneasy, embittered and  
resentful?

How open were you prepared to be - and how  
open and honest did you feel your friend was  
with you? Where would you put your level of  
trust? And how are you going to deal with  
that?

Before I continue with my thesis, I want to explain that I am not going to preach on the gospel today as I feel that we covered it quite reasonably last week.

We discussed the issue of holding up the serpent on a staff as analogous to Jesus being raised on the Cross. Here, of course, with his statement that, '...when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all men to myself,' not only predicts his crucifixion, but also that he comes to save all men, not just the Jews. I also spoke on the topic of 'gaining the whole world and losing one's soul,' so I won't repeat myself here where the text is so similar.

What I want to look at is how Jesus shows us what it is to both learn and teach forgiveness.

So why the quote from Shakespeare? Not, I assure you, just to try and impress - but to make us wonder whether we feel people are capable of changing - and, indeed, whether we feel we are too. What you did in the past - are you just going to do again and again in the future?

Our Wednesday Book Club, which is exploring Norm Carroll's book 'Miracles, Messages and Metaphors', talks in many places about growth. And I don't think we can talk about that topic

seriously unless we accept that growth without change is unlikely, if not impossible.

The motivational speaker, Joel Barker (no relation) once said, 'Vision without action is merely a dream. Action without vision just passes the time. Vision with action can change the world.'

I would argue that 'vision with action' is growth, and we see here it is used with the verb 'to change'.

Why is change important? After all, what is wrong with the 'status quo'?

I remember listening to an old hillbilly who had reached the ripe old age of 103, and was being interviewed on local radio by some young

reporter. She said, '103 - wow! That's really an amazing age!' 'Yup,' said the old guy. 'You really must have seen a lot of life,' she went on. 'Yup,' said the old guy. 'And a huge number of changes in your lifetime,' she continues. 'Yup,' said the old guy - 'and I've been against every one of 'em.'

It wasn't that the old guy couldn't change, it was that he wouldn't change.

It has been said - rightly, I think - that there are none so blind as those who will not see. Not those who cannot see.

For those of you who occasionally look at the cartoons in the newspapers - it's all right, I'm not asking for a show of hands - I remember a Hagar the Horrible cartoon. For those of you who really don't know who he is (and I'm not sure I believe you!) he is a Viking who likes to do battle and has a wife , Helga - a true Valkyrie - that he's terrified of.

One day he is out on the battlements of his castle, furiously fighting off an opposing tribe that is trying to scale the walls. Arrows are flying, boiling oil is being poured, and Hagar is flailing his sword around like a man demented. There is a man behind him with a prototype machine gun that he is trying to sell to Hagar,

but Hagar's response is, 'Not now, not now! I've got a battle to fight!'

There are many things in our lives that demand change on our part and I don't intend trying to list them. But I would suggest that none is more important than forgiveness.

Forgiveness requires that both the giver and receiver change.

The giver has to drop their resentment and bitterness at whatever perceived wrong has been done to them, and be genuine if their offer of the forgiveness; the receiver of the forgiveness has to be repentant and humble enough to accept the offer.

Both of these require serious attitude shifts in the individuals.

But neither can move on - that is, grow - unless both meet each other in that mutual moment of reconciliation. Words are not enough - their hearts must be in it too.

It is in such moments that we both learn and grow. Those of you who attended the zoom with Norm Carroll on Wednesday will have noted his take on the response of the Canaanite woman who asked for Jesus to heal her sick daughter.

Jesus swings around on her, having initially ignored her as an inferior race, and delivers a stinging rebuke that is not only cruel but

racist; 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.' This is not what we would expect of Jesus - and it gets worse. The woman begs Jesus to help her, and he turns on her and says, 'It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs.'

The Canaanite woman suddenly metamorphoses from supplicant to teacher when she responds to this second insult by saying, 'Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table.'

That must have brought Jesus up pretty short and made him think. He was, after all, human like you and me. He was brought up in an atmosphere of prejudice and patriarchy. To

be pestered by not only a woman, but a woman of a despised tribe, and finally outmanoeuvred in argument must have both surprised him and engendered an instantly greater respect for that woman. He changes tack on the spot and compliments the woman for her faith and grants her request.

What has happened here? Jesus has not only changed, but grown in stature by so doing.

You may be aware of pieces of jewelry that have the letters, 'WWJD' on them. That stands for 'What Would Jesus Do?'

When we apply these words to this event in Matthew 15, it becomes a little more difficult

and even a little scary. I don't know about you, but I find Jesus unpredictable in this story - yes, I know, he is often unpredictable - but usually in a 'good' way. Here, he is unpredictable in a 'not so good way' - even a 'bad' way. Jesus is really not very nice until he's outgunned by the Canaanite lady. Then he reverts to the type of Jesus that we are more familiar with; the forgiving, the merciful, the generous healer.

I don't know if you are ever frightened by the person of Jesus, and if you are, did you ask yourself "Why?" For me, it is often the humanity of Jesus that scares me more than the divinity.

When we consider Jesus' divinity, we have a sense of 'Everything is going to be all right - he's God, nothing can really go wrong.' But when I look at Jesus as a human being, I see traits I can see in myself - traits I don't like - and that scares me.

Let's look at a couple of instances. Luke chapter 2 has Jesus lagging behind all the rest of his family and relatives in Jerusalem after they had been there for the annual Feast of the Passover. He was 12 years old; he knew the Book of Moses, the Pentateuch; he was well acquainted with the Ten Commandments. The fifth commandment states; 'Honour your father and your mother...'

Was Jesus demonstrating 'honour' to his parents by staying behind in Jerusalem for 3 days, without telling them what he had in mind - even if he did have a ready answer for them when they had travelled back looking for him for all that time?

Jesus giving vent to his anger in clearing the Temple of the money changers is reported in all four of the canonical gospels. There is something rather satisfying about that, don't you think? I find it gives me a sort of permission to vent my own anger from time to time, although I don't have quite such a credible reason for doing so as Jesus did.

But perhaps the most compelling and terrifying moment when we see the humanity of Jesus is his moment of emotional and spiritual agony in the garden of Gethsemane.

I won't do what is now called a 'spoiler-alert' and steal the magnificent language of the gospels of Matthew and Luke, but you should go home and read how Jesus begged his heavenly Father to relieve him of his path to the Cross. We will revisit these words in the week between Palm Sunday and Easter Day.

But for now, just dwell on the humanity of Jesus and how much you can relate to his mental anguish.

I have allowed myself to stray a little from my own path here and the story of the Canaanite woman, for it is here that I want to point out that in order to forgive another's sins or transgressions against us, we have first to forgive ourselves - and, I suggest, that is not something we can do without help - help from a Higher Power - God.

Even Jesus in his fragile humanity needed the power of God to calm and restore his equilibrium. At the temptations, angels ministered to him, at the beginning of his ministry - his baptism, the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove strengthened him for the path that would lead to his Cross; in the Garden of



Gethsemane after his final words, 'Thy will be done', an angel ministered to him.

Is it possible that in each case he knew that he was seeking a way out that was not prescribed, and by his praying and divine support he was able to forgive himself for his weakness? Did he sin? No - but was he tempted to? - most assuredly.

Just as the Canaanite woman put him on the spot, so too did the Roman Centurion who came to Jesus to ask him to heal his sick servant. (Matt:8). To have appeared anything but hostile to the loathed soldiers of an occupying

force would have been to court criticism and vilification.

To conclude then, forgiveness is paramount in our lives if we are to grow spiritually, and we cannot grow if we do not change. That means that our forgiveness must come from the heart, and not be 'just words.'

I will share a small reflection on the topic that I came across yesterday; 'I have found that I have to forgive others in all situations to maintain any real spiritual progress. The vital importance of forgiving may not be obvious to me at first sight, but my studies tell me that every great spiritual leader has insisted strongly upon it.

I must forgive injuries, not just in words, or as a matter of form, but in my heart. I do this not for the other person's sake, but for my own sake. Resentment, anger, or a desire to see someone punished, are things that rot my soul. Such things fasten my troubles to me with chains.'

I think it's time we asked Jesus to help us break those chains - don't you?