

Pentecost 16 – Wesley 9:00 am – 28th September 2014
Sermon by Robert James

Theme: Social Justice Sunday'

Reading: Matthew 21:23-32 'Parable of the Two Sons'

Text: A man had two sons; and he came to the first, and said, 'Son, go and work today in my vineyard.' The son answered, 'I will not': but afterward he repented, and went. The man came to the second son, and said likewise. And the second son answered, 'I go, sir': and went not."

When the father asked the sons to work in the vineyard, one said 'no' and then did what he was told. The other said 'yes', then refused to work. Of course, the sons and daughters of this congregation would not be as troublesome as this – it must have been an issue just in Biblical times!

But Jesus isn't content with just relating the parable - He drives it home further. By asking which son did the right thing, Jesus challenges us to identify with these characters.

An increasing proportion of people in Australia say "No" to religion, but go about their lives in a highly sociable and ethical fashion.

Sadly, some people embrace Christianity, become amateur preachers, even become priests and pontificate from their pulpits, then abuse the principles and the people in their care. Most of us don't go that far, but I suggest that we have all struggled with the reality as expressed in Matthew 26 that "the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak."

So we find it easy to **agree** to "go and work in the vineyard" or "complete our homework before watching TV", but then it's not so easy to **realise** the promise. So we're expressing a rather primal facet of the human condition related so eloquently in the parable.

But I see wonderful expressions of the contrary. Somebody well known to many of us here has served the nation with distinction over a career in high office in public life. Remaining passionate and productive long after the end of standard paid employment, he calls himself "a failed retiree". Without any crowing about past accomplishments or future promises, he and his wife continue to respond to calls upon their time, talents and experience long after they've been urged by friends and family to say "No more". This actually applies to quite a few people here.

The one who says 'yes', but never gets around to it, is like the religious leaders in the Temple – extravagant in their piety but mean in their real caring for others.

So the question of motive is also important. The four pillars of the Moral Rearmament movement: Absolute honesty, absolute purity, absolute unselfishness and absolute love, may seem rather old-fashioned these days - particularly the notion of "purity".

But surely these values are as relevant as ever! We might delight in being seen helping old ladies across the road, or be chairman of all the church committees, or ostentatiously make the biggest donation to the organ fund. These are worthy contributions to society, but surely, in themselves they lack true nobility. Surely they **don't** deserve the same respect as working quietly, even anonymously to the same ends. Of course, the extroverts among us don't necessarily like to be quiet or anonymous. Ah well, the Lord in his wisdom has made us all different for good reason, and we need to respect that as well.

Well, today is Social Justice Sunday, which we celebrate every year around Floriade time. I think that it's helpful not to consider social justice as people being nice to each other, children attending to the vineyard when instructed, giving to the poor, or trying to keep our new year resolutions. These things **are** virtuous, and income re-distribution is certainly plays a key role in a compassionate and just society. But social justice is more than just social welfare – it relates to the structure and values underpinning our civilisation.

When Jeanne and I travelled recently, for the first time, in Europe and the UK, I was greatly impressed not just by the plethora of castles and cathedrals, but by the way that history seems to be a real and living force in the lives of the people:

- * the memories of oppression and deprivation suffered by the Irish,
- * the pride and passion of the Scottish in their ongoing itching for independence,
- * the sense of cultural and historical identity of the Welsh and the Cornish, and
- * the pride of the English in their long and hard-won democratic institutions.

Of course, none of these issues have been resolved to the satisfaction of all, as we saw in Scotland a few days ago. But I'd claim that we're a long way ahead of the process in Ukraine, Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine, Congo or Somalia.

What a pity that we cannot learn from experience how to build good government, social justice and common purpose among disparate faiths and cultural minorities overnight – a process that took 800 years or so in Britain, along with a lot of strife and conflict and regime changes. How many of us have been to see the Magna Carta a few hundred metres up the hill in Parliament House? (It's one of the four surviving originals in the world). What a document – a reminder of the great cost of our democracy!

And in **Australia**, we should not be all that complacent about the maturity of our own society – Look at the history of our treatment of Aborigines, refugees, children in institutions and many of our immigrants.

The Uniting Church suffers from being composed of fallible human beings, but I'd say that we have a better record than most in response to our social justice issues such as

- * protesting our invasion of Iraq,
- * urging our Government's apology to the Stolen Generations,
- * stewardship of our natural environment,
- * our responsibility for climate change,
- * our responsibility to refugees,
- * Aboriginal welfare issues
- * interfaith dialogue
- * building social justice at home and abroad.

This is a mixed bag of successes and failures, but I believe that the Church has consistently been a very positive participant in the debate, not only for promoting a positive outcome, but for the right reasons.

Of course, we're rarely unanimous, even within this congregation, about supporting a particular action. Whether it's about refugees, joining the "Coalition of the Willing" to invade Iraq, or how to respond to the rise of an Islamic Caliphate. Sadly, we don't have an "anti-ideology" missile up our sleeve, so the response options are rather more complex.

There are many opportunities for each of us to engage in, according to our preferences and circumstances.

The Uniting Church in Australia's peak body is the National Assembly, of which our very own Gregor Henderson, James Haire and Ian Tanner have been presidents. Uniting World is an agency of the Assembly, which connects people and church communities in Australia, the Pacific, Asia and Africa to partner in God's mission: overcoming poverty and enabling discipleship and faith-filled action.

Uniting Justice pursues national matters of social and economic justice, human rights, peace and the environment.

This parish supports the work of Frontier Services, which turned 102 on Friday. That was when the Rev John Flynn was commissioned to head the Australian Inland Mission.

Uniting Care Australia advocates policies and programs that will improve people's quality of life, committed to speaking with and on behalf of those who are the most vulnerable and disadvantaged for the common good. The Uniting Care network is one of the largest providers of community services in Australia, with over 1,300 sites providing services supporting more than 2 million Australians each year. The network employs 35,000 staff and 24,000 volunteers. We provide services to children, young people and families, Indigenous Australians, people with disabilities, the poor and disadvantaged, people from culturally diverse backgrounds and elderly people in urban, rural and remote communities.

Our Gregor Henderson has been and remains active in his retirement, travelling and meeting people in the World Parliament of Religions, which we hosted here in 2009, the World Council of Churches and the Australian National Council of Churches which has met here also.

As well as supporting these programmes through the Uniting Church framework, we engage directly with projects overseas such as the electricity supply project to the mission at Salamo in PNG, largely the hands-on work of Beth and Ross Monk.

There are also numerous programmes at the State level (through the NSW Synod), and locally through our own Presbytery. The Presbytery Social Justice Network includes some energetic and resourceful people. We're currently looking at the prospect of drug law reform.

At the local level, we support the Veranda project at the Stewart Flats, in collaboration with other local churches. A project like this is perhaps more a matter of social welfare than of social justice.

Our 30 Kw solar energy scheme has worked well for the last four years, producing over 150,000 KwH of electricity. This has been a medium for members of the parish to engage in producing solar electricity more efficiently than they could with their own systems at home.

The Forrest Men's Shed is a local initiative, which has brought together local men and their families in a very positive sharing environment.

Many of us are part of the group "Christians for an Ethical Society" which runs forums which engage people and issues of great diversity.

We support the Canberra Interfaith Forum, a coming together of people from a dozen religious faiths, including indigenous groups, participating in multicultural festivals, public forums and special events. The CIF has created a Environmental, Meditation and Healing Garden across the lake near the Hospice, stemming from the inspiration and leadership of Vernon.

So there's lots to be involved in at the global, national and local level. The parish website has lots of information, heavily infested with links, to all these things and many more, under the menu item "Social Justice", with various subheadings. You can see the website address at the top of the Notice sheet.

Don't forget that you can influence our Government and the world via your Members of parliament – the ACT Legislative Assembly, and Federal House of Reps, and Senate. On the table outside, there's a map of the federal electorates in the ACT, and info on our politicians.

Let's get to know our pollies, treat them with respect, ask them in detail about their achievements and plans, and be clear about what we expect of them. There's no good purpose served by rubbishing them as people, or in their role. The clumsy, imperfect democratic system we have is about the best available. Let's engage with it and make it work the best we can.

Our reading today from Exodus detailed the grumbling and whinging of the Children of Israel against their leadership. There was no mention of gratitude for the success of their journey so far, suggestions for improvement, or complaints about misuse of credit cards. Just whingeing. Perhaps there's a lesson for us here, as well.

I respect Mahatma Ghandi's invocation to "Be the change that you want to see in the world"! But we can certainly do more than that. The Uniting Church, and others provide a plethora of agencies, programmes and projects to engage with. We can also think globally and act locally in the cause of social justice, by writing to newspapers, talking and arguing issues with people directly, and engaging with our elected members of parliament.

So let's live in the spirit of the lad in Jesus' parable, whose actions were greater than his promises. Let's live the motto of our Service and Social Justice Mission, and work "to turn good will from a spark to a flame!"

Amen

Robert James
28/09/2014