

Trinity 16, 23 September 2007

Amos 8:4-7
1 Timothy 2:1-7
Luke 16:1-13

Today's Gospel startles me once again with just how shocking and unexpected Jesus can be. Listen to this translation of part of the passage:

Streetwise people are smarter than in this regard than law-abiding citizens. They are on constant alert, looking for angles, surviving by their wits. I want you to be smart in the same way—but for what is right—using every adversity to stimulate you to creative survival, so that you'll live, really live, and not complacently just get by on good behaviour.

Jesus says if only we put as much effort into working for him as we do into trying to avoid the washing-up, or ironing, or Hoovering, or cheating the

Today's Gospel tells us to be crafty for Christ:

- Use the ways of contemporary culture to further the cause of right.
- Take risks like the steward did—he was commended for his audacity.
- Don't be lazy, or take things lying down.

This is much like the parable of the talents: make good use of what comes your way.

It's a call to action, and to shrewd action, planned action, cunning action.

The epistle can also be read as a call to action. Paul tells us to pray. Gandhi demonstrated that a national day of prayer can bring a government to its knees. Prayer, whatever else it may do, unlocks God's will in us, releases God's purpose. It is the key that unlocks the forces of good in the world. So a call to action as well.

And Amos gives us something to wage war against: oppression. Isn't Amos just wonderful? Cows.

We can all recognise the big boys of oppression: torture, imprisonment, exploitation—easy to spot. It's easy to see how this might be applied worldwide, and at the moment to Zimbabwe in particular.

But what about ways we might not think of? There is always a personal message in Our Lord's teaching, so what about oppression in our personal relationships? How might **we** oppress others?

Christian teaching always, again and again, shouts that we must live with delight and joy and commitment. I came that you might have life and have it abundantly. And if I am to live to the full, I am to do all in my power to enable others to do likewise. I must not take anything away from another person, anything that oppresses someone else, belittles them.

This is one of the issues that the curates considered on last weekend's training course: how easy it is for persuasion to become manipulation, and manipulation to become bullying.

Sometimes a bit of manipulation is a good thing if the result is to reduce the amount of pain in the world. Someone intent on suicide, for example, may be manipulated from that course of action. The general view would probably be that that was a good thing. There is something in that about the common good, the intent of the manipulator – is it selfish or not?

But 'persuasion' or manipulation simply to satisfy the self-esteem of the perpetrator, to make the perpetrator feel good, is always wrong. This surely is bullying, oppression. It takes something away from the victim.

It's rife in the workplace, daily life, even the church. It occurs every time we feel we are not being heard, or we feel a put-down. I am not talking about robust argument, for example when someone disagrees with us – that's a compliment for it means we've been taken seriously. I am talking about when we feel patronised, stamped on, ignored, talked over. This is bullying. It requires action.

My story about Faculty meetings.

And then there is an inner personal meaning. It is easy to let our inner negative thoughts 'bully' our positive ones. The inner demons, of which CS Lewis wrote in *The Screwtape Letters*: our fears, our hesitancy, the caution that paralyzes. The things that bully the forward-looking part of ourselves into

cowardice and negativity. The demons – and their name is legion – that all Jesus’s healings set out to conquer.

So what can we do?

- We can do the equivalent of curling up and dying. Suffering in silence. Letting ourselves be crucified. I thought Jesus died on the cross so that we didn’t have to.
- Or we can do the equivalent of fighting—rising again after the insult.

So, like charity, I begin at home with myself, and I ask each of you to consider these questions for yourself.

- How can we use the ways of contemporary culture to oppose oppression when we encounter it?
- How can we ensure that **we** don’t oppress anyone, bully anyone?
- How can we ensure that we don’t allow the devil within to stifle our true natures and creativity? Remember, Jesus said, ‘I came that you may have life, and have it abundantly.’

And this takes us back to what Paul calls prayer, or reflection, or meditation. Self-examination.

I give you permission to challenge me robustly if you think I’m doing any of these destructive and self-destructive things.

Amen