

## Sermon 17 August 2008

I heard two contrasting responses recently to the present state of society. One was from Marc Alexander, a candidate for election to parliament later this year, and the other from Peter Majendie, an artist who specialises in interactive public installations. Marc was addressing a problem that is pretty common at the moment: our anxiety about the way in which the justice system deals with criminals. He wasn't from the Sensible Sentencing Trust, though there were some similarities. It doesn't take long to get together a catalogue of stories about the justice system that are either amusing or horrifying, depending on your point of view, or how involved you are: such as the criminal with 60 odd convictions who commits another crime when let out on bail; or the character who is given parole after having served about a third of his sentence for a horrific crime, with the added irony that he was a convicted felon when put away, commits another crime while on parole and is known to the police as a recidivist who will almost certainly spend most of his life in gaol, perhaps even to the point where he cannot usefully function in society and look after himself and longs for the security of prison life as a way of coping.

It is tempting to take the line in the face of this that what society needs to do is to toughen up and stop being so woosie about criminals. It is not quite lock them up and throw away the key, but close. So ten years must mean ten years. The approach can be characterised as a hardening up of society: draw the boundaries of acceptable and unacceptable behaviour more sharply, and deal firmly and bluntly with anyone who steps over the mark. It is an opinion that is not hard to encourage in society. It attracts my sympathy when I hear some of the stories.

But at a deeper level, it does nothing. In a throw-away remark in the same speech, Marc commented that society had lost its plimsoll line. What he did not explore at all was why that had happened. The inherent suggestion was that if we toughened up a bit we could recover it. It is as though, through the adoption of firm measures, we could compel people to be good, or at least protect the good from those who do not toe the line. Well, society certainly needs clear laws and good structures, but the story cannot be left there.

Peter Majendie had a rather different approach. He was outlining his proposal to put up another of his interactive artistic creations in Latimer Square in the days before Christmas. He was talking about the offer of some volunteers who are willing to work with him, except that they want to hand out Bible tracts and talk to the people who come to the installation to look around it. As Peter said, the well-meaning volunteers get upset when he tells them: No tracts, and leave the people alone. Let them respond in their own way and in their own time to whatever they see. And as he says, if you leave people alone with their thoughts, but faced with some thought-provoking material, it is fascinating and enriching to see what sometimes happens to people. They are often people who have been dealt with by our justice system, and few if any of them will go anywhere near a church.

There are some interesting parallels between these two stories and the inherent contrasts between the ways advocated by the Pharisees for being faithful to God, and the ways of God as seen in the Christian story. The Pharisees had much in common with all those who want to deal with the presenting problems in society. They were less concerned with the moral issues than they were with spiritual issues and commitment to the covenant, but they knew for certain that God called Israel to obedience, and the price of failure was the judgement of God in the form of oppression by foreigners and God's wrath. So their call was to shape up as a nation. Occasionally it took the form of someone like Paul heading off to Damascus to bring some deviant Jews into line.

Jesus invited people to look at it another way. The inner spirit of the covenant, according to Jesus, was God's intention to set up a relationship of mutual love with humanity, inviting us as well to enter into this new relationship, established by the free grace of God that calls us by invitation, will not coerce and waits for our response, in our own time and in our own way to the exhibition of the love of God, and then expects that to be reflected in the way we deal with one another. And the model of our response in this fashion begins with Mary, whose feast we celebrated on Friday (or today in Opawa).

There are a number of fascinating things about Mary's part in this story. We hear the whole mythological scope of the story in the reading from Revelation, in which the archfiend waits lurking to devour Mary's child the instant it is born – a wonderfully epic image worthy of Tolkien or Pullman. Paul (now a follower of Jesus) takes us to the centre of things with his understanding that God redeems us not from outside by a rescue operation, but from inside as one of us, born as we are, and into the same world we inhabit and struggle with, so that out of Christ's struggles we can share in his Spirit and become children of God; not slaves who must obey, but children who live in mutual love with God and each other.

That still leaves another key element of the story to reflect on. We don't actually get it in our readings this morning, even though Mary's Magnificat points to the turning of the world upside down by the peculiar way in which God works. But we can get a profound insight into that peculiar way if we go back to the annunciation. Right from the outset God's approach to us is not by rule or command but by invitation, and even God waits on Mary's Yes (even though she probably has little grasp of the implications of that Yes). The gospel of our transformation comes through our free and willing response to the freely offered invitation of God to a mutual relationship. The question is always whether we are willing to accept such graciousness.