



Archbishop of Canterbury

Sermon by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams

at Derby Civic Cathedral

Sunday 25th September 2011

Readings:

Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32

Matthew 21:23-32

Sometimes when somebody asks us a question what we need to say in response is “What kind of question are you really asking?” Because a question can have one message on its face but another behind it. By the time we get to this point in St Matthew’s Gospel we know that Jesus is frequently confronted by people asking questions with a massive hidden agenda.

And this is a story about how Jesus responds to a question by saying “What kind of question are you really asking?” His enemies ask him “What is the authority of what you say?” And Jesus replies by asking “Do you understand what you mean by authority? Are you just asking a theoretical question or a real human one? Let’s see how you cope with a real question. Not so long ago [says Jesus] somebody appeared in your midst saying “You need to change your life and it’s possible to change your life. Exactly what did you do about it? The Authority of John the Baptist - was it from heaven or was it of human origin?”

And his embarrassed opponents are stuck with saying that they've really no idea, because frankly it was never a real question. Jesus was talking to people who never thought it was really urgent to change their lives, who never really worried whether it was possible that things might be different. Jesus was talking to people who were perfectly satisfied with things as they are and really did not want to be interrupted or disturbed. "We do not know [they say] it was never that urgent. It was never a real question for us."

And Jesus turns round and says "Look at all the people who thought it was a real question. Look at all the people who were excited and transformed by a message that said the world might be different. Look at them - the collaborators with the Roman Empire. Look at them the prostitutes, look at them the outcasts, the forgotten, the wretched. Talking about changing your life wasn't a matter of fear for them - they knew they needed to change. They knew they were hungry and they knew where there was bread to be found. But as for you [says he to his critics] as for you, you don't know what it is to be hungry for change. You don't know what it is to be desperate for healing or renewal. You're quite right - you don't have enough." And that's where the Gospel begins to bite.

The Gospel is good news for people who are hungry for something new in their lives. Good news for people who are hungry to become more human - that's the bottom line. Some people feel, some people experience themselves, as if change were never necessary. We've got it sorted, we know what we want, we need, what we can get and that's perfectly all right. And some people surprise themselves by longing for something more. It's a phrase some of you just might recognise as an adaptation of a phrase in a well known poem by Phillip Larkin about church going. He says "We're always surprising in ourselves an urge to be more serious."

If we can get in touch with that hunger to be more serious, to be more human; that urgent desire to grow up into something different, something fuller - then the Gospel is for us. And if we think that we've got our humanity sorted, we don't have to be too bothered about other people who haven't. The Gospel is going to fall on deaf ears, which is why Jesus says quite frighteningly in St Luke's Gospel "They have Moses and the prophets to speak to them. They're not going to listen even if somebody rises from the dead."

And the little story that Jesus tells in the middle of all this about the man with two sons - how does that fit in? The father says to the first son "Go and work in the vineyard." And

that the son says "Shan't." And then realises - how, when, we don't know - realises that actually, much against his will and better judgement, he really needs to do what his father wants. He has a hunger to do something.

The second son, ordered by his father to go and work in the vineyard, says "Right away." And mysteriously finds any number of reasons for not bothering. It's not a matter of urgency for him, it's not a matter of hunger. It's not a matter of reluctantly coming to terms with the knowledge that "Yes you're going to need, you're going to *have* to change." You're hungry to grow, you're hungry to be more human.

It's at that level of hunger that the church works. The church we hope and pray looks around and asks, where is there a hunger in people's hearts to become more human - because we can work with that. We can work with the people who haven't got it all sorted out, who don't quite know what they mean by God, and yet know that they're hungry. One of the great gifts and joys of this visit to the Diocese of Derby has been to see the church doing just that - listening to places where people are hungry to become more human, aware of the need for change, aware of their own vulnerability. And aware, desperately aware, of the possibility that there might be something fuller, even if they can't see quite where it is.

The church is working here in a city shattered by bad news and struggling to pull together its confidence again, longing for change, for good news that will promise dignity to the working people of this city. The church is working with those left behind by society on the streets, the Derby City Mission waiting patiently to sit alongside the homeless and the helpless. Working with the farming community, deeply conscious of the risks and troubles it faces economic and practical, the problems of the next generation, the problems of milk prices, the problems of loneliness, demoralisation. The church is there listening for their hunger, listening for their hope.

Yesterday afternoon in Bampton, Chesterfield, I spent a quarter of an hour on the Church on a Bus - probably the most unusual place of Christian assembly that I've yet visited. Again, a ministry offered by the church, to people wanting a home where they can become more human. And the church, not pushing all the answers at them straightaway, but listening profoundly to their hunger.

And people who use that ministry, the people in the Order of the Black Sheep, again in Brompton, these are the people who know they need something, who know they need to grow up into a fuller humanity, into deeper relations. And for whom the promise of God means something that's very far from theoretical. These are the people that Jesus was talking about. These are the people that the church works with, because we in the church know – don't we? That we are hungry to become more human. We are here this morning, aren't we, to be fed by Jesus Christ in Holy Communion so that we grow up into his humanity, into the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ as the New Testament puts it.

We are only here, aren't we, because we are hungry to grow. Because we're not satisfied and complacent about ourselves, our relations, our hopes, our future. And we want to anchor those in the unending generosity of God which promises the resources, the nourishment, that will help us to become more human. And so when we encounter those whose hunger is so deep to grow in humanity, we recognise don't we the same urge and the same sense of reality – the raw salt taste of reality as somebody put it.

So as we take this morning's Gospel into our minds and hearts, Jesus encourages us to look inside and perhaps surprise ourselves by our hunger to be more serious, to be more human, to be more generous, to be more at home with God. And as we look within and find that urgency, that sense of hunger - hungering and thirsting for God's justice as Jesus puts it elsewhere - as we do that, we pray that we become that bit more sensitive, that bit more willing to listen, for the hungers of those around us.

The problem with the Pharisees and the lawyers and the experts in the law who criticise Jesus is not at all they're bad people. On the contrary, they're frighteningly good people - so good you could kick them as a friend of mine once said – frighteningly good people who are unhappily happy with themselves in all the wrong ways. Nothing is urgent enough to make a decision. The question about reality, truth and life is just not – forgive the jargon – an existential one. It's not one that makes a real difference to them.

And Jesus says "I'm sorry to have to tell you, but the people who really are hungry for life and humanity are going to elbow their way past you into the Kingdom of God, because they're hungry and you're not." And as anyone who has ever been to a function in the

Church Hall will know those who are hungry have a distinct advantage over those who are not when the food is on the table. Bishops know this very well.

We're here to get in touch with our hunger, to get back some sense of urgency, not only about satisfying our own hunger, but about meeting the hunger physical and spiritual of our society and our world. There's a moment fabled from the Middle Ages which was used by philosophers to illustrate some of the difficulties in thinking about free will. "Imagine [they said] a donkey poised between two heaps of hay. The donkey is at an equal distance from both heaps of hay and both heaps of hay are of exactly the same size. The donkey is hungry but can't make up its mind because it has free will, and so it starves to death because it can't decide to eat either of them." Well God help us for being stuck like that. When we are truly in touch with our need to become more human - that surprising urge to get more serious to change, to renew the face of the earth in a hopeful loving direction - as we get in touch with that, we really do become more what God has in mind for us as a church and as a human grace.

So this morning I believe Jesus is saying to you, to me, "Be hungry. It's alright to acknowledge that you need food and here it is for you." The bread and the wine of Holy Communion. The life, the love and the hope of Jesus himself. Christianity doesn't at the end of the day offer a theory about life. It offers, in the great words of St Augustine, "food to grow up with."

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.