

Trinity 16

At the time of the prophet Ezekiel there was a belief that we are punished for the sins of our parents. We've just heard Ezekiel repeat a popular saying expressing this belief - 'parents eat sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge'. But part of Ezekiel's truth-telling about God - that is, his prophecy - was to insist that each of us is responsible for his or her own actions and each of us alone will have to answer for what we do ourselves. So we can't hide behind the alleged goodness or evil of others (always so much easier for us to spot than our own); each of us stands before God in our own goodness and our own falling-short of goodness.

There was a particular reason for Ezekiel's prophecy. Talking to people in exile, who blamed their forebears for their situation, he wanted to shock them out of their complacent blame-shifting. We are, he said, each responsible for who we are now. And that is true of us as individuals and as the body of Christ. It is a mistake to blame the past, or some outside force for everything we don't like. If we look honestly into our own hearts we will find plenty to blame there. And if we then turn to meet God who comes lovingly to meet us in this most holy sacrament, we shall find pardon and new life.

We have all learnt this repeatedly in daily life: unless we accept responsibility for things, we see no need to change what isn't working. Sin is a relationship with God which isn't working. If we accept responsibility, we will want to do something to change, and God will help us. We have nothing to fear from the mercy of God.

And because we do not live in a vacuum, accepting personal responsibility also has an outward focus, not of blame but of building others up.

As S Paul wrote in Romans 14,

The life and death of each of us has its influence on others; if we live we live for the Lord; and if we die we die for the Lord, so that alive or dead we belong to the Lord. This explains why Christ both died and came to life, it was so that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.

As I wrote in Friday's email, being conformed to Christ means that we become what we are each meant to be, fully human as individuals and community: 'I came that they might have life and have it to the full'. The sign of us being on that road, according to Paul, is that 'nobody thinks of his own interests first but everybody thinks of other people's interests instead'.

Consistency of speech and action, an integration of who we are, is an obvious element of this. Jesus frequently tells stories like today's parable of the two sons, to emphasise the importance of doing God's will rather than *appearing* to be a religious person. Once again this is the difference between a good relationship and one that isn't working. In the good relationship, even if you have an off day, you acknowledge when you've got something wrong and the right things happen in the end. In a

relationship which isn't working, you say one thing and do another, which is high on Jesus' list of descriptions of sin. Constructive self-examination, which involves opening our eyes and being prepared to change our minds, is commended to us all.

Relationship is always about love which always involves change, or conversion in ourselves. Again, it often goes when we so assume that means the other person: 'I love you so much that want to change everything about you'. All of us are called to this kind of change, change of heart, conversion, because how we grow in the true priorities of God's kingdom. Jesus sought again and again to bring people to a change of heart. He succeeded in bringing it about in the most unlikely people. He wrote no one off. We are all God's children.

I have a good friend who was invited to be Rector of a city-centre parish in Sydney that I know well. When he had accepted the appointment, the Bishop asked him earnestly where he and his young family would live. Surprised at the question, as the Rectory is a large and pleasant house, he said he didn't understand. The bishop insisted that he surely couldn't live there. After some minutes of mutual misunderstanding my friend asked the bishop to spell out why he couldn't live there. The conservative evangelical bishop replied: 'because it is surrounded by sin'. To his credit my friend replied that was the very reason he *must* live there.

Jesus makes his point today by insisting that those we too-readily write off as sinners will be in heaven before us: projecting sin on to others is not how to get rid of it in ourselves. We all need the Lord's love and compassion. There is an essential goodness in us all which he can awaken and call forth in us if we let him. And that good God-given core in us, so often muted or locked up by disappointment, regret, guilt or fear, is our share of the boundless love of God by which we may be known as citizens of the Kingdom. Opening up and changing our perspective, questioning our habitual responses, also allows God to open our eyes to why he loves those we find unloveable.