

Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32; Phil 2:1-13; Matthew 21:23-32 – Jervis

Some of you may have lived with difficult people. You may have lived or be living with someone who does not think clearly or act in their own best interests. I know I have. I am certainly not talking about my wonderful husband. But I have lived with challenging people in my family.

There are people in my family who seem unable to do what is best for themselves; unable to care for themselves. They make self-destructive choices – despite the many words of advice and encouragement of those who love them – they do things that are harmful to their own good. By how they drink, by what they spend their time doing or not doing, by what they say or don't say.

They are fundamentally lonely, unhappy and anxious. And they are intransigent. No amount of coaxing, of warning, of nagging or of setting good examples or encouragement works. No matter how many ways I say to them 'just do it', things don't change. They are stuck in their misery. They seem truly unable to make healthy and life-giving choices.

I know this is not an uplifting or fun way to engage you in this sermon, but I do this because I think it goes to the heart of one of the themes in the Bible readings we have heard today. The theme of personal responsibility and repentance.

Ezekiel challenges Israel with a word of the Lord. The prophet says that the saying that is going around Israel – “The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge” – Ezekiel says that this saying is false. The Lord says through Ezekiel, “know that all lives are mine; the life of the parent as well as the life of the child is mine; it is only the person who sins that shall die.”

Personal responsibility.

In Matthew Jesus responds to the challenge of the religious and social leaders in Jerusalem. They want to know how and by whose power he is doing the amazing things he is doing – things like healing and teaching with transformative authority. Jesus throws the challenge back to them by raising the matter of John the Baptist.

John’s baptism had been a baptism of repentance; John had lived in the wilderness and called to all the people of Israel to come out to the wilderness; called them out to confess their sins - to repent and be baptized.

Jesus responds to the challenge of the chief priests and elders by asking them whether the baptism of John came from heaven or not. And they are caught, because their concern is only with protecting their social status – Matthew writes that the chief priests and elders said among themselves “If we say ‘from heaven’, Jesus will say to us, ‘why then did you not believe him?’”;

If we say ‘of human origin’, we are afraid of the crowd who thinks that John is a prophet’.

So they answer: ‘we do not know’. Jesus then tells them a parable which ends with him describing John’s significance: “For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.”

Jesus says to the chief priests and elders that the possibility of repentance was right before their eyes. But, they did not change their minds. They did not repent. It is those who did choose to change their lives – those who repented – the tax collectors and prostitutes – those difficult people the leaders separate themselves from– these people, Jesus says, are going into the kingdom of God first.

Both of these Biblical texts present repentance as critical and as personal. These Biblical passages emphasize that it is critical to recognize that God holds individuals personally responsible for their sins. You can’t blame someone else; and I suppose, you can’t take that on responsibility for someone else.

And it is no excuse to see this truth and not to believe it or do something about it. Jesus says to the chief priests and elders ‘even after you saw the power of John’s call for repentance you did not change your minds and believe him. You did not repent, even though you were offered the possibility of it. You are to blame for the sorry state you are in – the people you found difficult are getting into the kingdom ahead of you.

Jesus' rebuke of the chief priests and elders is based on a conviction that they are capable of changing their minds. That when they got John's call they *could* change their minds and believe.

Sounds straightforward this idea in Ezekiel and Matthew: people are responsible for their own sin and God offers a solution. Change your mind, change your way of life. Just do it.

But, what about those people who can't just do it? Those people who truly seem stuck and don't seem to have the power to change their minds? Those people that are in my family, that may be in your family, that may be in your circle of friends or neighbours?

The word of the Lord to Ezekiel and the word of Jesus to the chief priests and elders seems harsh and unrealistic.

And that brings us to the beautiful passage Paul wrote from prison to the church at Philippi. Many of you may have recognized part of this passage. The narrative of Jesus in a nutshell, the master story of the Christian faith.

The story about Jesus, who being in the form of God did not hold onto his life with God but poured himself into the likeness of humanity and, being found in the form of a human being, humbled himself, being so completely obedient that he died on a cross. And so God raised Jesus and exalted Jesus and gave him God's own name so that all would understand that Jesus Christ is Lord and that his life and ours are for the glory of God the Father.

This is a very different picture of Jesus than the demanding Jesus in the episode from Matthew's gospel. And the difference is largely because in Philippians we hear the master story – the whole story; the U-shaped story – Christ's life with God before becoming human; Christ's human life; and Christ's exalted life with God. And at the centre of the story – at the very centre, the transformative centre - is Jesus on the cross.

At the centre we find not a demanding Jesus, but Jesus obedient and humble. Jesus who recognizes that it is not just the difficult people who are stuck, but that in truth every one of us is. Everyone finds it impossible to repent.

That every one of us sees - just like the chief priests and elders see – we all see; but we do not believe. That everyone of us are like the chief priests and elders – doing things that are self-destructive, other destructive, creation destructive; and not figuring out how to change our minds and our ways.

We have Katrina, we have Harvey, we have Irma, we have Maria – and we don't change our ways. We have 9/11; we have London, Barcelona, Nice, Manchester; we have Charlottesville. And we don't change our ways. We have Syria and the Rohingya tragedy; we have the ridiculous and terrifying school yard taunts between Trump and Kim Jong-un. And we don't change our ways.

The master story of our faith with Jesus on the cross at the centre is a graphic description of the fact that we don't actually know - none of us – how to repent.

And so, Jesus does it for us.

Even though I have spent my adult life reading explanations for the divine mechanics of what happened on the cross none of the theories – especially Anselm's famous theory that God's justice required God's Son's sacrificial death – none of these theories makes sense to me.

It is only when I kneel before the cross on Good Friday – along with you – that I somehow understand the transformative power of Jesus' death on the cross. It is only when I contemplate and seek to connect the cross of Christ with other ways of knowing that I recognize – I see and believe – that Christ's cross changed things; it has changed me; it has changed you.

It has softened our resistance to repentance. It has helped us change our minds. In some inexplicable way the cross opens us to a way of life that is about life and health and wholeness.

As we contemplate the cross of Christ in the context of the whole story of Christ, we see that in Christ God offers us the life of Christ. And the life that flows from the cross allows us to look and believe. It frees us from our obstinacy and blindness. It allows for our repentance. The life of Christ that flows from the cross liberates us; it offers us the same disposition as Christ. Paul calls it the mind of Christ.

The difference between the Jesus we see in Matthew and the one Paul presents in Philippians is not only that in Philippians Paul tells the whole story. It is also that Paul is writing to people who, by means of Christ's cross, have begun to repent – who are changing their minds; he is writing to people like the prostitutes and tax collectors that Jesus provoked the chief priests and elders with.

Paul is writing to those who have entered the kingdom of God – who know that their life is in Christ.

And so, they are, in Paul's words carrying out their salvation with God's energy.

This is more than likely your situation also. That, in some mysterious or maybe not so mysterious way, you have been touched by the U shaped story of Christ, with the cross at its heart. And you have changed your minds – repented; you are allowing your minds and whole being to be transformed – you are working out your salvation because God is at work in you.

I think that there is no other way to do the hard work of love – which is the work of salvation. At least, no other way for me.

Without the mind of Christ, my mind is concerned about my comfort and personal interests and I quickly reach compassion fatigue with those who just can't do it.

But, Paul, writing chained to a wall in a prison in Philippi – writing to people who he says “God has graciously granted the privilege not only of believing in Christ but also of suffering for Christ's sake” – Paul reminds the Christians in Philippi – and the Christians at Redeemer – that God's power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine.

Because Christ left *his* life with God and, through the cross, offers *us* life with God we can leave this place today with the firm knowledge that God will empower us to love those who just can't do it.

And knowing, by God at work in us, that we are all difficult – I am; and you are.

But, nonetheless, God loves us beyond our imagining.

Glory to God whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine.