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ANGLICAN PARISH
ST. LAURENCE IN LANZAROTE

LIVING ROOM SERVICE #7 - SERMON

'Be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind'

This week I heard of a group of deeply committed Christians who were concerned about how a close friend was being treated by his superior. The group decided to draft a letter to the Chairperson ... but then wrestled with whether they should send it or not, as they knew it would cause problems within the team. Surely this would go against their Christian lifestyle – there must be another way to avoid ill feeling. What would Jesus do in such a situation?

Jesus is not always sweetness and light. Sometimes his actions are direct and his teaching is pointed. Here we have an exchange with his critics and a parable demonstrating that he can be sharp when the need arises. To understand the passage set for today, we need to see it in context. Jesus has, the day before, entered Jerusalem riding on a donkey, to the cheers and adulation of the crowds. The people have hailed him, shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" After this he enters the Temple, the heart of the Jewish establishment, and then throws over the tables of the money changers. He cures those who are sick and the people proclaim him as Son of David again. The next day, as he approaches the Temple, he curses a fruitless fig tree and it withers. He is, in other words, being provocative.

The chief priests, entirely understandably, ask what authority he has to do "these things". In response, Jesus is not impolite, but he is challenging. He has already criticised them for making it difficult for people to worship God and creating religious barriers in order to exclude. Now he demonstrates perfectly how to make faith difficult and how to make people feel unworthy – by turning the tables on them.

Firstly, he sets them a question that is impossible for them to answer, and then he tells a parable that shows them in a poor light. The elders and chief priests are unable to answer his question and are revealed as less worthy of the kingdom of God than tax collectors and prostitutes. This does not win Jesus any favours, but it makes the point very well.

I often use this wonderful opening words of St Paul's letter to the Philippians at the beginning of a meeting where we know there is tension and possible disagreement.

Asking those present to listen to these words closely:

Paul writes:

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete; be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus ...

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A real challenge to those who may have very different ideas ...

Challenging people, especially those in authority, is not easy.

There are many networks, power structures and assumptions that underlie how our society operates. We can't always see them and, even when we know that they are present, exposing them as unfair takes courage and commitment. It is far easier to keep our heads down, or to grumble to our neighbours, than to make a fuss.

Jesus is provocative, but he is not rude. He simply invites the chief priests to have a taste of their own medicine, to feel as they have made others to feel – ill at ease and a little inadequate.

When matters of justice are concerned, when people are marginalised, belittled or face prejudice because of their status or background, then, like Jesus, we look to stand with them. We campaign, we raise money, we support those who are voiceless or in need.

But this is only part of what seeking justice is about.

Challenge is also important.

Asking awkward questions of those who have the power to make changes is crucial.

Most of us find this more difficult, but in order that all God's children might have the opportunity to become the people that God wants them to be, then sometimes we need, like Jesus, to raise our heads and challenge those who govern to account.

Amen