

The Revd Stan Evans

Camino de las Cuestas 5c | 35572 Tias

Email: revdstanevans@gmail.com | T: +34 928 514241



ANGLICAN PARISH
ST. LAURENCE IN LANZAROTE

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 4TH 2020 - SERMON

'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone'

Jack was a former prison warder in South Africa. One of his treasures was a photograph album containing two pictures of himself shaking hands with two of the men who defined modern South Africa. In the first, Jack is eighteen years old, and was collecting a school prize from the then Prime Minister – Hendrik Verwoerd – a man remembered as the architect of apartheid.

In the second photograph, taken twentyfive years later, Jack is pictured alongside Nelson Mandela, shortly after his release from prison in 1990. He is beaming broadly, clearly delighted by the situation. These two men, Jack and Mandela, first met in the 1960's, when the future president was widely vilified and denounced as a terrorist. To say that they 'met', however, might imply that they somehow connected, which was not really the case. Jack was a prison officer on Robben Island, and his role entailed locking up the prisoners in the afternoon, and then patrol outside their cells. In those days, the warders did not in any sense get to know the prisoners – for they simply represented troublemakers.

As late as 1988, Jack was assigned to cook for Mandela, he thought of it just as a job – and a backwards career move at that. But two years later he and Mandela were thrown together, something changed. The change was so profound that they became friends and, by the time Mandela died, Jack was able to describe him as 'a brother'. A remarkable change for two remarkable men.

The parable that Jesus tells in Matthew today is essentially a story about how we fail to acknowledge the humanity in one another. When the wicked tenants see each of the landlord's representatives approaching. They completely fail – or refuse – to recognise a fellow human being. Rather, they see only someone who has come to deprive them of something – what's more – that they actually owe to another. Their judgement is clouded by selfish greed. If we are preoccupied by our own desires, we can never really see anyone else for what he or she really is.

In the Epistle of Paul to the Philippians – Paul demonstrates how, when we fail to see the humanity in other people, at the same time we are locking ourselves into our own roles and restricting our own potential. Paul starts by recounting what he once represented.

As a Jew and a Pharisee he ticked all the boxes, and he certainly lived up to expectations. So he duly and dutifully victimised and persecuted the Christians whom he considered to be a renegade underclass. But in clinging to his status, all he was doing was locking himself and other people in a prison of prejudice.

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How often do we lock ourselves into entrenched and fixed ideas about other people?

It could be a relationship that keeps us in a rut, or a bad habit that imprisons us in a negative routine. How can these possibly represent freedom when they only restrict us?

Like Jack, Paul and the tenants, we pay a very heavy price for our prejudice, because we miss out on getting to know the Mandelas of the world and – worst of all – we do it to the detriment of our relationship with our loving and compassionate God.

Freedom was the great theme of Mandela's life.

His story is that of a man who, throughout years of incarceration, despite experiencing great injustice and inhumanity, managed to hold fast to his own sense of humanity. As a result, he found a way, despite the walls and bars enclosing him, to stay spiritually and morally free. So ultimately, the man who was vilified and denounced as a terrorist – the rejected stone – went on to become a great inspirational leader, both politically and spiritually.

Years after his release, he wrote:

As I walked out of the door toward the gate that would lead me to freedom, I knew if I didn't leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I'd still be in prison.

Unfortunately, on a day to day level other people can be extremely trying, and it's all too easy to become wrapped up in our worries and wants. So how do we mend our ways? The two key words are prayer and practice. Armed with these two we learn to grow in faith, so that we begin to see how each and every person we meet – no matter what he or she represents, or has or hasn't done – is made in the image of God, and is a brother or sister in Christ.

As your Chaplain – I am compelled to this role – for I have to remember always, and with thanksgiving, that you – each of you – are the treasure entrusted to me as members of Christ's own flock, bought through the shedding of his own blood on the cross.

You are one with Him – you are his body.

And so it is my duty to serve you with joy, and to build you up in faith, and to do all in my power to bring you all to a loving obedience to Christ.

What is of paramount importance is that we acknowledge the humanity in one another – regardless of status, origin, hierarchy.....

Reciprocal humanity.

Acknowledging all of those entrusted with - and being acknowledged by all for the role that each of us has been given by the God who loves us equally.

Amen