

BEING WITHOUT HONOUR¹

**A sermon preached by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh in St James' Church,
King Street, Sydney, on the Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, 30 July 2017**

Several weeks ago, we sang a Charles Wesley hymn, “Forth in Thy name, O Lord, I go, My daily labour to pursue”.² This hymn is, in essence, a prayer for the beginning of the working day. Its third verse starts with the line: “Preserve me from my calling’s snare”. This verse was omitted from the Methodist hymn book of my youth, so I was intrigued to find it for the first time when I became an Anglican and began to use the *English Hymnal*. It has captured my attention specifically because my academic life was teaching people in the profession, or calling, of social work. It caused me to ask whether that profession had a snare. Is there something about what we do in our calling that is a hidden trap? That is, after all, what a snare is. Nobody walks deliberately into a snare. Its virtue is that it is hidden.

At another time, I could have quite a lot to say about that subject but, today, I want to identify a snare in the calling of the preacher. That snare is self-indulgence. It is to fall into the habit of using the pulpit for one’s own satisfaction. In 2013, a writer in the Canadian *Anglican Journal* addressed a number of myths about preaching. He said:

The fifth myth is that clergy believe their friends are excellent judges concerning the effectiveness of their sermons. It is a well-documented fact that when someone cares for the preacher, they tend to overlook any weaknesses. The lack of helpful feedback means that, over time, the preacher settles comfortably into imperfections, until these become second nature and difficult to correct.³

I was drawn to these comments because today’s readings tempt me considerably. The reading from Genesis tempts me to continue to explore the patriarchal society of the Old Testament as I did on my last preaching occasion. Such explorations give me endless satisfaction. Self-indulgence!

The reading from Romans contains, beginning with the words “What then are we to say about these things” to the end of the chapter, the epistle reading that I want to have at my funeral. For a fleeting moment, I was tempted to craft my own funeral sermon and to preach it secretly this morning. There’s self-indulgence for you!

Fortunately, the lectionary that presented me with these temptations has also directed my attention to some words of Jesus that are intriguing and that we might easily pass over.

If we look carefully at this morning’s gospel reading, we can’t accuse Jesus of self-indulgence or of receiving soft reviews from his friends. On the contrary, everything was wrong. Chapter 13 of Matthew’s gospel is a series of parables. The gospel writer presents them as having all been preached at the one time, which is probably not the case. It is a collection of parables, brought together because they give an accumulative account of some important points that Jesus made.

Two weeks ago, we heard the parable of the sower and, last week, had it not been the Patronal Festival, we would have heard the parable of the weeds. This is another farming story about

¹ Readings: Genesis 29:15-28; Psalm 105:1-11; Romans 8:26-39; Matthew 13:44-58

² *New English Hymnal*, No. 235

³ Robert Hartley “Common myths about preaching”, *Anglican Journal*, January 10, 2013

the field that, having been sown with good seed, is over sown with weeds in an act of agricultural terrorism. Jesus warns his disciples to leave the separation of the two forms of plant to the harvest time, which really means leaving it to God. The problem is that we can't easily tell the difference. Christians have frequently made mistakes about who might represent the good seed and who might represent the weeds; and we are still doing it. We can make two different mistakes. The first is that we too readily identify ourselves as good seed. The second is that we too readily identify outsiders as weeds.

This morning the series comes to an end with the parable of the treasure, the parable of the pearl and the parable of the net of fish. The first two are designed to demonstrate the value of the kingdom that Jesus is proclaiming. Someone, possibly an agricultural labourer, digging in a field that is not his own, finds a treasure. In the absence of banks and safes, hiding valuables in the ground provided security. Today's image would be the person with a metal detector. Somewhat unethically, the finder reburies the treasure and risks everything by buying the field and, thus, its contents. The merchant, however, is not an accidental finder. He knows what he is looking for. The message is the same in each case. The kingdom is of great value and demands everything from you.

Actually, the people to whom Jesus was speaking already lived in a kingdom that demanded everything but gave little back. Roman occupied Palestine was that kingdom. They would have been quite aware of the political relevance of these two parables. So, when Jesus asks his disciples whether or not they understand what he has said, they readily answer that they do. A word of warning here; when people answer yes to such a question from Jesus, the implication is that they actually do not understand. We had a clear example of this last Sunday when James and John quickly answered that they can drink the same cup as Jesus. Little did they know what that cup would turn out to be.

The parable about the netful of fish is similar to the parable of the weeds in the field. It refers to separating out the good from the bad. A Jewish commentator suggests that the situation that Matthew describes relates to the necessity to separate kosher fish from non-kosher fish.⁴ Only fish with both fins and scales are kosher. This excludes, in our context, for example, sharks and leatherjackets, which have fins but no scales, and all crustaceans, which have neither. Jesus uses this customary practice to great effect and points out that what we do in this life really matters. The parable does not assert a fiery end. It rather uses that imagery to emphasise the point that Jesus is making.

The next comment from Jesus is somewhat enigmatic. He talks about the scribe bringing out the old and the new. This comment refers to the blending of the old traditions with the new message of Jesus. Jesus builds on and reinterprets the tradition into which he was born. For this reason, his comment is the perfect bridge to what follows.

Jesus goes to his hometown, that is to Nazareth. In contrast to the welcome that he had received elsewhere, Jesus is rejected by those amongst whom he had grown up. They certainly took him to the cleaners. First, they refer to his lowly origins as the son of a carpenter. Then they name his mother. We might pass this by, but naming a person as the son of his mother was not only unusual, but insulting. Children were always referred to as being the sons or daughters of their fathers. There is no evidence that Matthew knew of any discussion about the virgin birth or of the perpetual virginity of Mary, so he is not reporting in a way coloured by that theology.

⁴ Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 26

Rather, he is saying that the locals put Jesus down, possibly even reflecting on his masculinity. In any case, he was too well known to be capable of the things that they had heard of him. They reject him and Luke's version of the story says that they did so with some violence, threatening to throw him over a cliff.⁵

Matthew says that the people of Nazareth "took offence" at Jesus. An alternative version, using more closely the Greek original, is that they were "scandalised" by him. Preaching on September 11 last year, I used a quotation from Austen Ivereigh who, using the work of René Girard, commented that

[Scandal] begins with moral outrage, a mixture of fear and anxiety, and the sense, suddenly that you are at one with everyone else in your victimhood and pain, and the other—all of them—suddenly looks like the enemy.

Everyone loves to join in a scandalized, scapegoating crowd—especially politicians. ... But that's the effect of what Girard called a "scandal," when old antagonisms vanish in the illusion of oneness A scandal creates a thrilling but aggressive feeling; the sense of oneness with others is accompanied by a search for "the contaminating element,"⁶

What worried the people of Nazareth so much that they joined together to reject Jesus? I suspect that the reason related back to Jesus's earlier comment about bringing out the old and the new. The people of Nazareth were, like everyone else, under the domination of the Roman empire. They too, understood the political meaning of the parables of the treasure and the pearl. They too understood the parable of the netful of fish and the need to do the right and they were afraid. The person making these statements came from amongst their own. He must be got rid of as soon as possible, so that the consequences might not come back on them. They dared not attack his teachings directly. They attacked him and made him the one to be ejected for their own safety.

It is not too much to say that we have the same fears when confronted by Jesus. Rowan Williams suggests that

... Christians are capable of turning their mission ... into a travesty of behaving as if they were the proprietors of a system which they alone were licensed to manage or administer. We constantly try to use the action of God for the sake of the manageable plans and ideologies of an unregenerate humanity, to make it serve some kind of exclusive interest, national or sectional, liberal, conservative, whatever. We become *anxious* about the gospel entrusted to us, about how easily it might be corrupted by error or fashion, and so *we* corrupt it by trying to fence it around.⁷

And this is where we make our own scapegoats, finding the ones who must be excluded. In that moment, we also exclude Jesus.

⁵ Luke 4:16-30

⁶ <http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2016/07/28/4508816.htm> See also

<http://akosbalogh.com/2016/08/01/have-you-seen-the-bizarre-french-response-to-islamic-terrorism/>

⁷ Rowan Williams, "Against Anxiety, Beyond Triumphalism" in *Open to Judgement: Sermons and Addresses*, London, Darton, Longman and Todd, 1994, p. 268