



SUNDAY 13 SEPTEMBER 2020

DIOCESE OF Hexham & Newcastle

The Parishes of: Bishop Auckland || Newton Aycliffe & Shildon || Willington
Crook, Tow Law & Wolsingham || Tudhoe || Coundon, Ferryhill & Windlestone

ESCOMB PARTNERSHIP NOTE

24th Sunday of the Year (A): Matthew 18: 21-25

There are only seven basic plots behind all stories - so the theory goes.

From ancient epic poems to tomorrow's blockbuster films, variations on key themes get bounced around by simple, vivid or whacky imaginations. Skill lies in handling detail. Painters and writers give us pictures because pictures speak to us. Speakers craft images that can pick us up and carry us to any place. Good storytellers are artists.

Jesus was a brilliant storyteller. His forty-odd parables have become classics in any language. His teaching stories are vehicles ticking away in the memory, ready to surface even after seeming dormant for years. Let someone mention the prodigal son, or feeding the five thousand, turning water into wine or the good Samaritan, and you realise how Jesus has entered your mind. Life can trigger these stories any day as they come up for air in your experience.

One clever device crops up regularly. A narrative that engages your sympathy, anger or other feelings becomes challenging when you realise it's really about you. Nothing new about this ploy, but it's skilful use can be penetrating. Often it's meant to be.

Today's Gospel story describes a creep of an individual who runs up a colossal debt and after pleading for mercy is let off the whole amount with nothing to pay. You'd think relief and gratitude would have influenced his behaviour. Not a bit of it. Starting to throttle and then imprisoning a mate for owing him a comparatively paltry sum enrages his colleagues and us too. This is a man who doesn't or cannot understand generosity. Living by what you can get away with does that. It warps the mind and heart and we fail to learn just how corrosive greed and complacency can be.

The brilliance of the story is that we know this ungrateful so-and-so very well - it's you and me! We've been let off debts we cannot possibly repay - our sins and selfishness. Unless we constantly revisit and appreciate the mercy we're blessed with and take it to heart, then like the creep in the parable, we'll serially fail to show leniency, mercy and forgiveness to others. Asking Our Father to forgive us as we forgive others is Jesus' dangerous warning to us.

Jesus' story is about the Kingdom. To think like the Lord thinks is the lesson here. This powerful tale is meant not just to grab our attention and excite our feelings. It's here to make us think. It's here to change our outlook. It's here to teach us that, like St Peter, we follow Jesus to copy him and live differently. The alternative is that we line up with the disgraceful servant in the story - and he was flung into prison. It's a tough story designed to shock. Be shocked. Folks, we're very difficult to teach.



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More from Pope Francis

At a time when we most need a missionary dynamism which will bring salt and light to the world, many lay people fear that they may be asked to undertake some apostolic work and they seek to avoid any responsibility that may take away from their free time. For example, it has become very difficult today to find trained parish catechists willing to persevere in this work for some years. Something similar is also happening with priests who are obsessed with protecting their free time. This is frequently due to the fact that people feel an overbearing need to guard their personal freedom, as though the task of evangelisation was a dangerous poison rather than a joyful response to God's love which summons us to mission and makes us fulfilled and productive. Some resist giving themselves over completely to mission and thus end up in a state of paralysis and acedia.

The problem is not always an excess of activity, but rather activity undertaken badly, without adequate motivation, without a spirituality which would permeate it and make it pleasurable. As a result, work becomes more tiring than necessary, even leading at times to illness. Far from a content and happy tiredness, this is a tense, burdensome, dissatisfying and, in the end, unbearable fatigue.

Some fall into it because they throw themselves into unrealistic projects and are not satisfied simply to do what they reasonably can. Others, because they lack the patience to allow processes to mature; they want everything to fall from heaven. Others, because they are attached to a few projects or vain dreams of success. Others, because they have lost real contact with people and so depersonalise their work that they are more concerned with the road map than with the journey itself. Others are unable to wait; they want to dominate the rhythm of life. Today's obsession with immediate results makes it hard for pastoral workers to tolerate anything that smacks of disagreement, possible failure, criticism, the cross.

The Joy of the Gospel - paras 81-82