



A sermon for the Cathedral Eucharist at Wells Cathedral, preached on Sunday 27 September by the Reverend Edward Day, Cathedral Curate.

Readings: Exodus 17.1-7 and Matthew 21.23-32.

Was I wrong?

I was wrong. Would you be surprised if I told you that I have never said those words before? Maybe you would believe that, but you probably wouldn't believe me if I said that I've never had to use those words before. Fortunately, like the rest of humanity, this is not my first time admitting I'm wrong. Because I have been wrong. Quite a lot.

I've insisted on wearing a woolen jumper because I was absolutely certain it would be cold and then spent the rest of the day slowly melting. I've confidently shouted out answers at University Challenge, proclaimed all the contestants to be idiots, and then realised that I got the question wrong myself. I've built IKEA wardrobes and stepped back to find that I've put one of the doors on upside down and somehow lost six Allen keys that afternoon alone. I've ordered olive oil online to discover when it's delivered that I've overordered and five litres is almost more blood than there is in my body. To translate, that's about nine imperial pints. I've mispronounced thousands of words. I've misspelt millions of words. I've sung thousands of wrong notes; every now and then I accidentally sing a right one. I've missed hundreds of turnings off the motorway. I've forgotten hundreds of people's names. Michaels have become Marks. Tinas have become Tonys. Sebastians have become Steves.

All this is to say: I was wrong. Although I know this has been true a lot of the time, there is still something rather daunting about uttering those words. We live in a world which doesn't particularly encourage wrongness as a virtue. Changing your mind is branded a U-turn. We seem to expect people somehow to have arrived fully formed, with all the correct opinions, and then to maintain them consistently from birth to death. And so, we become frightened of changing our minds, lest we be seen as unintelligent.

Consequently, we dig in. We defend positions when our inner convictions have left us. We would rather be consistently wrong than publicly corrected. And yet, rather inconveniently, Our Lord Jesus Christ seems to imply that changing your mind can be holy.

The narrative we've heard from the Gospel according to St Matthew is almost absurdly simple. A father has two sons. He asks the first to work in the vineyard. 'No!' comes the reply. Not an especially promising start. The father asks the second son. 'Yes, sir'. Except the second son does nothing while the first son, Christ tells us, changes his mind and goes to work. Jesus asks, which one did the will of his father? The answer is seemingly clear: the son who changed his mind.

Notice also where Jesus in our reading places the emphasis when he turns upon the chief priests and elders. Their great failure is not simply that they were wrong about John the Baptist. Jesus says: *'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'*. That is much more serious; because being wrong is part of being human, however, refusing to be changed is something else entirely.

After a service here in the Cathedral, I was once told that, with modern technology, we could surely reconstruct the Lady Chapel windows so perfectly that nobody would ever know that they had been shattered. Now, naturally, it is not in my character to tell anybody that they're wrong. Even if they are. So, I smiled. But internally, I was delivering a rather lengthy and heated lecture. Because I think that rather misses the point. The Lady Chapel windows in their kaleidoscopic reconstruction are not imperfect because we can see where they were once broken. Their beauty lies in the fact that we can see their brokenness. They wear their history. They have been wounded, repaired, and altered, and they are beautiful not because somebody has managed to pretend that the Civil War didn't happen but because all of it is somehow held together today.

Maybe holiness looks less like pristine glossiness and rather more like the perfect imperfection of the shattered and reconstructed glass.

We can expend an enormous amount of energy trying to present ourselves as people who have always been right. No cracks. No awkward joints. No evidence that we have ever thought something foolish, hurt somebody, misunderstood God, misunderstood ourselves. But that is not holiness. That is restoration by Photoshop.

Christianity however belongs somewhere much more honest. Repentance itself means turning around. Conversion means being changed. The Christian life is therefore not a lifelong project of proving that we were right all along. It is allowing God, again and again, to transform us. To change our perspectives. To change our minds. To find new focuses.

This requires humility. Not weakness. Not stupidity. Not having no convictions. Quite the opposite. It takes an immense deal of courage to hold a conviction seriously enough to examine it. It takes an unbelievable deal of bravery to say, 'I believed this, but now I have listened'; 'I thought I understood, but now I have learnt'; 'I judged that person, but I was mistaken'; 'I caused hurt, and I'm sorry';

or ‘I thought God could only work through people like this, but God surprised me’.

This is just as important for the Church as it is for us personally. Because the Church can become terribly good at being certain. We can confuse faithfulness to God with faithfulness to our own opinions about God. We can baptise our preferences, sanctify our prejudices, dress up our habits as eternal truths but then become offended when the Holy Spirit refuses to behave accordingly.

The chief priests and elders in the Gospel are not stupid people. Far from it. They know the Scriptures, they take religion seriously, they have authority. The problem, according to Christ, is that they have become so certain of where God ought to be that they cannot recognise God standing in front of them. And Jesus tells us that the tax-collectors and prostitutes are entering the Kingdom ahead of them because they have discovered that change is possible.

This is the danger for religious people, like us. We can become so invested in being right that we lose the capacity to repent. And a Church incapable of changing its mind is a Church incapable of repentance. That doesn’t mean that every change is good. It doesn’t mean that the truth is whatever happens to be fashionable this morning. It means something much more demanding; namely, that our deepest loyalty is not to our own correctness but to Jesus Christ. That means being willing to discover that God is bigger than the little territory we have marked out for Him.

In our first reading, the Israelites are thirsty, they quarrel, they complain, Moses despairs, and water eventually comes from a rock. And Moses names the place Massah and Meribah because they asked him, *‘Is the Lord among us or not?’*

Perhaps that is the question underneath all of this. Not, ‘am I right?’ or ‘have I won the argument?’. Rather, *‘is the Lord among us or not?’* Because, if the Lord is really among us, then none of us can realistically expect to remain entirely unchanged. God may yet disturb us. God may yet correct us. God may yet reveal Himself in somebody we had dismissed. God may yet ask us to reconsider something about which we were absolutely certain.

The holiest of words are not necessarily the most complicated. They can be as simple as, ‘forgive me’ or ‘I was wrong’. Then, like the first son, with changed minds, we get up and go into the vineyard. Because the Kingdom of God does not belong to those who have never been wrong. It belongs to imperfect humans who are still willing to be changed.

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