

Trinity 13 2021

During my teenage years I had a close friend called Robin. Everybody thought that there was 'more to it than that' but we always were and remain just good friends – mainly I think because we share a similar sense of humour. On my 18th birthday Robin presented me with a big bunch of yellow chrysanthemums and a wooden spoon bedecked with a ribbon. 'I'm giving you this,' he said, because you just love to stir things. Which was entirely true.

That spoon is now getting on for 50 years old, and I refuse to throw it out. Here it is. It has travelled with me from house to house, and its long history is written upon it. You shouldn't put wooden implements in the dishwasher – its harsh action destroys the natural oils that protect them, so over the years they gain a kind of patina. Just like treasured pieces of furniture the patina mellows and enriches them, carrying as it does the traces of past times and people.

My Mum really appreciated Robin's joke – 'You certainly are a prize stirrer!' she would laugh whenever she saw that spoon. So it makes me think of her as well as of him, of the countless sauces I have made for my children's favourite dish of macaroni cheese, of the time it caught fire when left unattended on the gas hob.

But a couple of weeks ago when I was washing up I noticed an accumulation of something in these crevices, and I realised to my horror that by no stretch of the imagination could it be described as patina – it was simply accumulated crud. I took a knife to it, scraped it off, and found that there was quite a lot more. I'd just let it build up, assuming it was part of the spoon itself, when it was in fact an accretion that was making a very good breeding ground for germs.

In today's Gospel passage Jesus is talking about something rather similar. He is telling the scribes and the Pharisees that they have made the fatal error of mistaking crud for patina. They have let crud build up, stuff that

never really was part of the original thing – in this case not a wooden spoon but the law of God; stuff that has made it heavier and potentially dangerous; and instead of seeing it for what it is and scraping it away they have gloried in it. That is why Jesus frequently refers to the Pharisees as blind.

Jesus quotes from the Prophet Isaiah, who draws a distinction between God's law and human tradition and then, he directs Isaiah's charge at them "You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition!"

Now while the Pharisees were notorious for embellishing the law –keeping it with knobs on - a lot of things that they did, for example ritual washing and strictly observing the sabbath, are there in the books of the Law in the Old Testament; so perhaps it was reasonable for them to assume that they were indeed the command of God. And these things are, of course, not bad in themselves; it is good to be clean and to rest. It is good to be self-disciplined and to have a rule of life.

But not if these things get in the way of God's purposes. When asked what his understanding of the Law was Jesus famously said

'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one;
you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.'
'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."

Jesus didn't make these commandments up himself, they are drawn from the Old Testament books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy; but what he did was to cut through the inessentials to the heart of the matter. Love for God and neighbour.

In a part of this passage (vv. 9-13) that has been edited out of today's Gospel reading he goes on to say that if you are so concerned with additions to the law like giving all your spare money to the Temple (for which we might read parish share) so that you have nothing left to fund the care of your elderly parents then you have – quote – 'made the word of God void through the traditions you have handed on'.

Jesus is talking about empty religion, a religion that has lost its heart and soul, and mind and which saps the strength; religion that may end up doing precisely the opposite of what was intended in the first place. He's talking about something today we would call 'going through the motions' or a 'tick-box mentality'. It's something we find in all walks of life, not just religion. I've encountered it in health care where people stick slavishly to complicated care protocols and forget why these protocols were imposed in the first place. The result is often a loss of common humanity, and in one case that I know of, an avoidable loss of life.

Human beings seem to have an innate tendency to add things, to try and make life better by imposing systems and rules, and then to keep on tweaking them. The story of the tower of Babel seems, at least in part, to be about this. These systems and rules are often reasonable and well intentioned – catchy slogans to communicate who we are; liturgies and vestments to express the beauty and truth of our faith; protocols and risk assessments to ensure vulnerable people are protected; faculties to protect the integrity of our historic buildings. I'm not suggesting that we get rid of these things. But notice how they can consume us and divert us from the heart and soul of our faith, sometimes to the extent that we are in danger of forgetting what it was all about in the first place.

This is why so much of our faith journey involves remembering – remembering where we came from and who we are. As I've said, Jesus didn't invent a new set of rules for people to live by, he invited his Jewish

listeners to go back and remember what their faith had been about in the first place. When he argues with his opponents who accuse him of being a young man with new ideas he points backwards and utters that enigmatic phrase 'before Abraham was I am.'

This is why the angels at the tomb tell the women to remember Jesus' words and the men to go back to the place where it all started. This is why on the Road to Emmaus Jesus reminds the disciples about where they have come from 'beginning with Moses and the prophets' and inspires them to return there – back from Emmaus to Jerusalem. This is what happens when the prodigal son comes to himself – he remembers his home and he returns to it. This is what happens when we gather around the Lord's table to remember that night when he was betrayed. As someone once said – 'Every time we celebrate the Eucharist we remember who we are' (or at least we should if we haven't turned even that into something that is simply going through the motions).

We need to keep remembering and returning, going back in order to move forward afresh. In our life as a national church, in our community life here in HT/Hailey, and perhaps most importantly in our personal walk with God. We need to look at ourselves carefully, to remember what it was all about in the first place for us, and try and to work out the difference between the wonderful patina that carries our faith story and the crud that weighs us down and stops us moving forward.

Of course distinguishing the patina from the crud is easier said than done but Jesus offers us a clear model. When pressed to elaborate on his summary of the law – loving God and neighbour – he tells the story of the Good Samaritan. It was religious crud that led the priest and Levite to pass by on the other side; they had forgotten what it had all been about in the first place. They were Jewish, but Paul has very similar things to say to Christians:

though I have the power of prophecy, to penetrate all mysteries and knowledge, and though I have all the faith necessary to move mountains -- if I am without love, I am nothing. Though I should give away to the poor all that I possess, and even give up my body to be burned -- if I am without love, it will do me no good whatever.