

What we think matters. What we say matters. How we act matters. It matters because it comes from within us, from the heart.

These two stories we've heard today can be seen in some senses as joined together.

David dances before the Lord, but he doesn't care what others think of him, he is dancing before God's ark, finally bringing it back to Jerusalem and yet we read that Saul's daughter (his wife) 'despised him in her heart'. This harsh judgment is because she sees his behavior as ridiculous as over the top as not becoming of a king, allowing his garments to fly open and reveal himself, like someone beneath him, in front of servants.

And yet, David is at the moment, in the moment, thinking of nothing but praising God. 'David danced before the Lord with all his might'.

Now in our second story, we come to another King, Herod, criticized by John the Baptist for marrying his wife's brother, he has John arrested but still admires him, "knowing that he was a righteous and holy man" and protects him from being killed as his new wife would like him to. He likes to talk to John, even though his wife wants John dead. So there he is at his own birthday party he drinks and showing off to his friends unthinkingly perhaps the alcohol blurring his judgment offers his new daughter who dances also and so beautifully for him that anything she desires he offers her, up to half his kingdom immediately under oath. Going to her mother she asks her what she should ask for- she comes back with a surprising answer she wants John the baptist's head brought to her on a platter. This is not what Herod has expected but now he is trapped. He gave her an oath in front of his guests and friends so he has to stick to it and so John's head is brought on a platter for the girl, and Herod grieves himself for having promised so rashly. What we say matters.

Both these stories are about 'saving face'.

Both men acted spontaneously, but David's heart was focused on God, he was living in the moment for the Lord and wasn't concerned what others thought, even his wife.

Herod, on the other hand, was living in the moment for himself by trying to impress his guests and daughter with his generosity he became trapped.

Michal too was more concerned with how David's actions appeared to others, like Herod, rather than the motivation behind the actions of what David was doing, which was celebrating the return of the ark to Jerusalem. A few verses on we are told she never bore a child until her death, a deep disgrace in the ancient world. In other words, David no longer looked upon her favourably and neither did God so Saul's line was never to be mixed with David's.

So what we think matters, and what we say matters because it springs from what we think and what we think springs from the heart.

I should just clarify here that we **all** say things we regret, we **all** make mistakes, we are **all** sinners, but the good news is that by drawing nearer to God day by day he promises and He does draw near to us. By caring more about what **God** thinks than anyone else we are able to put everything even our sins in perspective. With his divine help we are able to overcome the fear of what others might think of us, we are able to do daring things, to live a fuller life in the knowledge that we are loved and accepted as we are. We are able to live a forgiven life, knowing that when we ask for forgiveness and mean it, God grants it.

David's own life contained such deep sins within it, which weren't without consequences, and yet, David afterwards

leaves behind the trauma. How? He believes and trusts in God's forgiveness and continues loving and following God knowing his sins are forgiven. If it is good enough for David shouldn't it be good enough for us too? Yet we often pick up or pick over past sins as if they've not been cast into the sea of forgetfulness as God promises.

It is David who writes, 'I meditate on your word day and night'. He is still even after his mistakes known as a 'man after God's own heart', the line from which Christ descends. Why? Not because he doesn't make mistakes, adultery and murder are such public mistakes to make, perhaps bigger and deeper than many of us have or will ever make, but because he understands his complete and utter dependence upon God, and from day one he learns to live and celebrate the moment right now in God's presence. He knows what it is to walk as a forgiven sinner, a person after God's own heart.

As Christ says, those who have been forgiven much, love much'.

Here we are in this beautiful building, and last night's rain has given the grass some well deserved nourishment. It will never be now again. We will never have the opportunity to bestow God's grace, love and forgiveness on those around us today at this moment, or indeed to accept his deep and unending love and forgiveness for us personally as we ask to be forgiven for our sins. Right now sitting here, just what we can call to mind now.

A forgiveness that is so deep that even whilst they hammered nails into his hands Christ said 'forgive them they know not what they do'.

It is this level of forgiveness and grace God gives to us and empowers us with. A love that goes beyond who we are, where we've come from and what we look like. It is this we

are reminded of as we partake in communion in a moment, becoming literally 'Little Christs' as the word "Christian" actually means by accepting part of who God is into our own sinful bodies, allowing God's grace to transform us from within through his holy spirit. The action of communion physically choosing Christ taking and eating and drinking and the words, 'the body and blood of Jesus Christ keep you in eternal life. To which we all respond, 'AMEN' which again literally means, 'so be it' or 'I agree', Matters. What we think, what we say, what we do, matters.

Three things then in the last couple of weeks running up to my priesthood made me think about words and actions. Why they matter.

Firstly, my ordination retreat where we looked at 'struggling to be holy', as our main topic, divided as it was into three days we started with what is holy and who in our lives do we feel is a holy person. Think about that for a moment. Who would say is holy that you know or know about? We then went into 'what desire means and looks like?' – how God allows us to have both good and bad desires and that all of these are to bring us closer to God, not just the good ones, to allow his healing grace to transform us and our desires to be in line with his plans for good in our lives. And finally we looked at forgiveness and how as a forgiven people and even more specifically we as those becoming priests who may hear people's confessions and who are given the authority to give absolution must give it in the same unconditional way Christ does to everyone who comes to him.

Again and again, we read in the gospels people cry out to him, have mercy on me, a sinner. Again and again, he says 'Your sins are forgiven go and sin no more', the blind man, the leper, the woman at the well, the women caught in adultery, all are forgiven and sent away rejoicing and praising God.

As a church we can too often and too easily add in caveats to forgiveness as if this person just has to do this or if they were a bit more like that then they could be forgiven, but that's not what God does he preaches forgiving someone 70 x 70 in other words, limitless forgiveness. Be merciful as your father in heaven is merciful to you. What is the story of the prodigal son if not about limitless forgiveness?

I do not have time here to go into what that looks like for us, but I do know we haven't the capacity for all that love and forgiveness in our own strength and that we need to cry out daily for God to help us and enable us to be his forgiven and forgiving people and I do also know that forgiving is a process, like peeling back an onion, a layer at a time, depending on the hurt it can take years and years. It is not the same as condoning, it doesn't mean in some cases it's even healthy to remain in contact with the person, but we can still **choose** to forgive them, to give them into God's hands. And by releasing them into his care we also release **ourselves** into God's care, his arms of love held out for us. By forgiving, even the most awful crimes, we don't let bitterness or a victim mentality take hold of us nor indeed do we worry about what others think of us for doing it. God's love, God's grace is enough. It empowers us, stops us being a victim, help us move forward into the light, away from darkness from bitterness and from hate.

This is God's plan that the light came into the world and the darkness cannot overcome it.

We are God's light, now, today, every time we forgive a brother or sister from our heart.

The Christ way is not easy but the burden is light. The more light we let in the lighter we also become.

So looking in depth at what struggling to be holy might mean for me I reread the gospels and saw again and again that Christ's kingdom was about forgiveness and healing and coming for the lost, the broken, those who feel isolated and alone. Just being kind, so often; what is the feeding of the five thousand other than a compassionate act of someone who understands what it is to be tired and hungry? Christ understands because he is a human being capable of feeling grief and anger and tiredness and the need to be alone, except he is aware of never truly being alone, apart from that one terrible moment on the cross, so painfully momentarily abandoned as he takes the weight of the sin of the world upon his shoulders for us all, he is always with the father and the spirit, working and sensing and acting upon the will of God, the love of God for the world.

Secondly, I did a funeral that I found very special. All funerals are special but this lady had been outspoken, creative, cultured, organised and caring. It struck me that her funeral was small because she lived to a great age and was far away from her original home where they were also going to have a memorial service for her the following week. But her only son had told me a story that nearing death, when she heard a child cry who had fallen by the neighbouring bed of someone on her ward, she perked up, because she was always until the very end concerned and caring for the other. She wanted to make sure the child was OK.

One of her grandchildren placed the complete works of Shakespeare on her coffin to go with her. She had loved words, she had loved people and it felt a real celebration of someone who hadn't cared what others thought of **her** but had cared deeply for **them**. It struck me what an amazing life she had led as a result of this.

Her kindnesses, her words had mattered. And still mattered now to those left behind.

Thirdly and finally, I have started reading again a lovely story to my three year old little girl that I was given originally for my son when he was the same age. I think it's message is so profound that I wanted to read a small passage of it as I close.

The story is about an imagery place for small wooden people who are called Wemmicks. They are all different, each unique; tall, fat, thin, small, but they've all been made by the same woodworker called Eli who lives on a hill overlooking their village. They each carry a box full of grey dot stickers and another box full of golden star stickers. Those who were clever, or look good or do good things and have a talent always get given stars but those who were a bit clumsy or fell over or whose paint was chipped or peeling or who said silly things always get given dots. And each day they wandered around giving each other dots or stars.

Punchinello, who was clumsy and not great to look at, had so many dots he hardly ever went out anymore and only hung out with those other wemmicks who also had lots of dots like him. He felt better around them. He was not a good wooden person so they told him. One day he meets someone who has no stickers at all no dots or stars, they simply don't stick. She just says her secret is she goes to see Eli the Woodcarver every day on the hill. Punchinello finally plucks up the courage to go and see Eli...

This is the scene after Eli has called him by name and picked him up and sat him on his vast work bench to talk to him:

"Every day I've been hoping you'd come," Eli explained.

"I came because I met someone who had no marks," said Punchinello.

"I know. She told me about you."

"Why don't the stickers stay on her?"

The maker spoke softly. "Because she has decided that what I think is more important than what they think. The stickers only stick if you let them." "What?"

“The stickers only stick if they matter to you. The more you trust my love, the less you care about their stickers.”

“I’m not sure I understand.”

Eli smiled. “You will, but it will take time. You’ve got a lot of marks. For now, just come to see me every day and let me remind you how much I care.”

Eli lifted Punchinello off the bench and set him on the ground.

“Remember,” Eli said as the Wemmick walked out of the door, “you are special because I made you. And I don’t make mistakes.”

Punchinello didn’t stop, but in his heart he thought, *I think he really means it*. And when he did, a dot fell to the ground.

Actually I should really have said at the beginning of this sermon what I’m saying at the end. What we think *doesn’t* matter, how we act *doesn’t* matter. It’s what God thinks that matters and how we act in relationship to knowing that, because our creator loves us just as we are and God never makes rubbish, because he never makes mistakes. Not one of us isn’t loved and cherished by Him for exactly who we are, spots and all. That’s the message it doesn’t matter what anyone thinks of us other than our maker. David knew this truth. Herod didn’t. They both made mistakes but David chose to seek God’s forgiveness and not to look to those around him for acceptance and approval.

As we partake in communion today we do so to remind us that we are loved, just as we are, everlastingly by an eternal God who wants us to spread his message of love, with the help of his spirit enabling to love across the world. As we leave here today, how we behave, how we are matters to God because he loves us and wants the best for us. This moment, where we are now, this place, we can choose fill it with love, grace, forgiveness and acceptance as the loved, forgiven grace-filled people of God which we are, or not.

May Christ give each one of us here the grace and the strength and the love to love and forgive both ourselves and those around us now, today and always.

Amen