

## Sermon Trinity 11 – Nick Moir - 23 August 2020

One of the blessings of lockdown, living where we do, was talking advantage of the hour allowed for daily exercise and jogging or walking down the river and across Stourbridge Common towards Ditton Fields – which is now a housing estate but, as its name suggests, was formerly the agricultural property of the squire and villagers of Fen Ditton. It abutted the east or Barnwell fields of Cambridge. As you passed from one to another the territory would look much the same but there would be subtle differences based on a different ownership of the lands and different choices made about its use and care. That pattern of living and of land use has survived for hundred indeed thousands of years.

It wasn't that different in the land of Christ in the first century. His village, Nazareth, was about the size of Fen Ditton before its fields were built upon. It too had a larger town nearby only slightly further away than Fen Ditton is from the centre of Cambridge. Its name was Sepphoris which, surprisingly you may think because of its proximity to the place of Jesus's upbringing, is never mentioned in the gospels. A recent archaeological study – and I know some of you have heard me say this before but my mind keeps coming to back to the significance of it – this study discovered among other things that the chemistry of the soil that they can date to the first century is significantly different as you pass from the fields of one community to the other. What they have found in the soil of the fields on the Sepphoris side of the boundary is clear evidence of considerable amounts of human excrement. Cross the boundary into the fields of Nazareth and there is no trace of this whatsoever. This and many other finds have led the scholars to conclude that Nazareth was particularly strict in its interpretation of the Law, the Torah – only the strictest schools taught that you couldn't use human excrement as fertiliser; Sepphoris on the other hand had a Roman theatre and many other cultural artefacts that suggest that its Jewish population had a very different attitude to Roman – and therefore Gentile – culture and their relationship to it. The village was Puritan, separatist, concerned to keep ritually clean; the town was progressive, liberal, relaxed and compromising.

That perhaps sheds light on why Jesus was rejected right at the beginning of his ministry by his own village and moved to base himself in Capernaum, a town perhaps not as Roman feeling as Sepphoris but where nonetheless, Luke tells us, the synagogue had been built by a Roman centurion and therefore where there was a lot of good will from the Jewish population to their Roman occupiers.

That brings us to this morning's gospel reading and the contrast between the member of the religious party that paid close attention to ritual purity and strict adherence to the Law, the Pharisee, and the (Publican or, more accurately) tax-collector who the more strict Jews regarded as neglectful of the Law and sellers-out to pagan ways. I think you have to hear this story against the backdrop of the religious politics of his day and not least Jesus' own background and likely upbringing.

I don't think that Jesus ever taught people to be neglectful of the Law; indeed he made it clear in the sermon on the mount that he did not come to abolish the law or the prophets, but to fulfil them (Matthew 5.17). I don't think he would have been any more comfortable in Sepphoris as he had been made to feel in Nazareth. But what he grew to detest was an approach to religion, including its Scriptures, that prioritised the minutiae against what he regarded as far more important:

*'Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the Law: justice, mercy and faith.'* [Matthew 23.23]

Jesus was constantly amazed by the faith and goodness he saw in those outside the normal boundaries of cleanliness and religious purity. He found pearls in pigsties. He did not seek to reject

his tradition but to see it fulfilled and renewed. He didn't look at the badge or the party – he had Pharisees amongst his friends too – he looked at the person and found the good there. His eyes were not blind to people's failings; he would have known that the tax-collector lived in a very morally dubious world where there was much corruption and exploitation. But the tax-collector knew that too – and that was his redemption.

The strange thing is that the tax-collector became the hero of this story for Christians and therefore the one imitated. It has changed the way we pray so that we bow our heads like him. Interestingly for Luke that was something shockingly unfamiliar for the Jewish custom was to look up. Such an oddity was this tax-collector that he 'would not even look up to heaven'. We might even say that the tax-collector has become the patron saint of Church of England worshippers, bowing our heads and standing 'afar off', not worthy to occupy the front pews in church.

It's easy then for us to turn this parable on its head:

Two men went up to church to pray. One, bowing his head in the back pew by himself, prayed, 'God I am thankful that I'm not like some Christians, all pious and self-righteous, zealous and opinionated, or even like that God-botherer in the front pew.'

Yes, the most devout can be the most annoying – indeed the most dangerous. They were for Jesus. But I don't think he forgot that he came from Nazareth; he didn't reject his heritage (it rejected him). He sought to be faithful. The tolerant, lukewarm old Church of England has to remind itself that those who renew its life seldom come from Sepphoris and nearly always come from the more rigorous Nazareth. And there perhaps is the twist in the tail.