

Parables for Pilgrims: A plank in the eye

Summary

Jesus teaches his apostles about learning from spiritual teachers and judging ourselves before helping others. Anyone who would teach others, must look to themselves first and examine their own spiritual health before trying to help others.

Background

I was reading the whole of Luke Chapter 6 to get the context for this parable just as the BBC exit poll was announced on Thursday night. Chapter 6 includes Luke's account of the Beatitudes, and I looked forward to the fruition of v.21b: "Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh". Unfortunately by the end of the night it turned out to be v.25b: "Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep".

After his night of prayer on a mountain, Jesus chooses 12 disciples. Then he went down with them and stood on a level place to teach. No longer up a mountain with God the Father, but the Son of God alongside the disciples he had just chosen.

Accordingly to Luke, people who were already following Jesus were now chosen as apostles; that is chosen as those who will be sent into the world with the Word of God. He teaches them about loving their enemies and, in this week's parable, about learning from spiritual teachers and judging ourselves before helping others. Then about how people should be judged spiritually by the fruit that comes out of them, followed by what is next week's parable of the wise and foolish builders.

It seems to me that this chapter is all about Jesus teaching his new disciples the basics of living according to the ways of God. We learn about the teacher who is inspired by his deep relationship with God to discern which people to call, teaching alongside them, stretching their expectations of who to love and what it means to love, and how to assess the spiritual health of their souls. It's all about building their lives on the teaching of Jesus.

In the specific verses we are looking at this evening, there appear to be two proverbs and then the parable.

Spiritual Sight

The first proverb is "Can the blind lead the blind? Will they not both fall into a pit?"

We have heard from John B the story that someone once said of Nelson, "Oh look there is a blind dog" and that John responded, "I sincerely hope not, one of us needs to be able to see. I'd be in real trouble if he was blind as well".

According to Tom Wright, "Jesus is saying, 'Beware of other teachings which look as though they are offering guidance but will in fact put you all in the ditch'".

I wonder if you know anyone who sounds very plausible but you just know that whatever they do results in everyone else being ditched. Someone I know is like this, so I have learnt to ask them searching questions in order to get as close to the truth as possible.

Those who would follow Jesus are called to develop the ability to discern and avoid falling into any ditches which may be dug for the naïve.

Teachers and Learners

The second proverb is "The student is not above the teacher, but everyone who is fully trained will be like their teacher".

This is the converse of the first proverb; that if someone has spiritual sight, then those who learn from them will be able to develop spiritually too.

This series is called *Parables for Pilgrims*. We are looking for challenges that these parables offer us as we seek to travel on our Christian lives as disciples of Christ. Discipleship means following someone who knows the way, so that everyone becomes a guide themselves.

"I am the way, the truth and the life" says Jesus in John's Gospel (14:6). "Your ears will hear a voice behind you saying 'This is the way, walk in it'" prophesied Isaiah (30:21) "and you will find rest for your souls" added Jeremiah (6:16). By following Jesus, his disciples are acknowledging that he is no blind guide but knows the way.

I wonder if we are prepared to look for those who have spiritual sight and then follow. Are we prepared to walk in the way of those who are themselves walking in the way of Christ? Or are we someone who doubts they could ever find anyone who's good enough to follow?

Judging ourselves before helping others

This brings us to the heart of the parable: "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Brother, let me take the speck out of your eye,' when you yourself fail to see the plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye."

Vivid language. Jesus the carpenter from Nazareth, lived, worked and died with wood. Sawdust is irritating. Sawdust in your eye is extremely irritating. A speck of sawdust is very small, and painful in the wrong place. Planks are big. Planks are solid. Planks are used to build structures. A lot of weight is put on a plank. So from his growing up with making things from wood, Jesus makes up this funny story about wood to make his point.

We have the most important things in common: we're all human beings created in the image of God ... created in, and by, and for love.

Love is passionate not neutral, and it often seems that we can be so passionate that when we sense someone else hasn't got it right we must tell them straight away they've got it wrong, and we have to be really vigorous about it when we tell them as it's so vitally important they don't miss the opportunity to get the right message! And email is so useful nowadays for sending our passionate messages because it doesn't matter if we are a great distance away from them, they will still get it. Won't they?

Archbishop Desmond Tutu has taught us in the west about the African concept of Ubuntu. That we are people because of other people. 'I am because you are'. The thing that defines us as human beings is relationship. It is within relationship and within communities that we become the people that we are meant to be. As human beings, we are made by God to be in relationship with one another. Just as God is relationship; Father, Son & Holy Spirit. Jesus prayed that we might be one, just as He and the Father are one - and invites us to be one with God.

So what does that mean for our passion? Well, "If you attack another member of the Body of Christ, you are punching yourself in your own eye" said Nicky Gumbel at the HTB Leadership Conference last week.

In this parable, Jesus is saying that anyone who would teach others, must look to themselves first and examine their own spiritual health before trying to help others.

So before jumping in with the perfect eye wash solution for somebody else to use, Jesus calls us to reflect on why we are so irritated and what our values are. What are we putting our weight on? What is the structure we've built up?

And then test it. Are we like Jesus? Are we being love? What is getting in the way? Are we in a ditch? Were we blindly following someone? Where have they led us?

In this parable, Jesus is saying that anyone who sees what they think is a fault in another, needs to reflect on the huge obstacle between themselves and God, before they can help anyone else with any small issue, however irritating it is to them.

Luke then gives us a FAQ. How do we know who is in a good place spiritually?

Answer: You will recognise them by their fruit. Listen to them, it will be obvious whether someone is close to God in their spiritual life or not. As William Shakespeare put it, "the evil men do lives after them". Whatever is in someone's soul will come out. Be that good, bad or indifferent.

We are called to self-awareness first, and then to seeking healing of our dis-ease before offering to help anyone else see more clearly.

In the immediate aftermath of the General Election, I wonder how this parable challenges us as the St Stephen's community and as individuals.

Let's have a few minutes silence to reflect.