

27th September 2020 Truro Cathedral

Ezek 18: 1 – 4, 25 – end

Psalms 25: 1 – 6

Phil 2: 1 – 13

Matt 21: 23 – 32

There's a little mantra that Scuba instructors use when they are teaching student divers about safety underwater: 'plan the dive, dive the plan'. In other words, they are taught never to enter the water without making a dive-plan – how deep they plan to dive, where they plan to go when they get there and how long they intend to stay in the water and so on. They are also taught to make backup plans in case something goes awry with the main plan and to agree with their dive buddy what they will do in those circumstances. And generally speaking most divers are pretty good at keeping to this way of doing things, not least because we are all aware that not keeping to the plan can have catastrophic consequences.

But human beings are not always so good at making plans – promises even – and indeed even less so, often, at sticking to them. The two sons in our gospel reading are a case in point. On the one hand, there is the son who makes a promise to his father – commits to a plan – but then fails to follow through. On the other hand there is the son who doesn't like to be tied down to any sort of commitment, although he nevertheless does actually go and do the work in the vineyard that his father asked of him. Neither son would have made a very safe diving companion.

But Jesus purpose in telling this story to the religious leaders in the temple would have been clear to his hearers who would have had no difficulty in understanding the implications. Whilst they understood the value of the first son's response – he may not have talked the talk but he did walk the walk - the second son, who listened to his father, said 'yes, yes' and then did nothing, was a sharply barbed challenge to the self-righteousness of those who kept strictly to the letter of the religious traditions but ignored the call to live out the real meaning of their religion in their daily lives and then looked down upon those who seemed to reject the law but actually lived out its significance in their lives day by day.

And whilst in our gospel story, Jesus clearly comes down on the side of the first son – the one who didn't make plans or promises, but did the right thing anyway – in truth for much of the complexity of human life in the 21st century, we do really need both. There are many attractions in having a carefree attitude that takes life as it comes and does what feels good on the day, but most of us know that more or less anything worthwhile needs a plan and the commitment to follow it through – a point indeed that Jesus makes elsewhere in his teaching. On the other hand, there is surely no point in making plans to ourselves or promises to others – or even to God – if we do not then follow through on them to the best of our ability. There is only any point in having a planned target to aim at, if we do at least make an effort towards achieving that aim.

A week or two ago, the UN published a report on the biological diversity of the planet, which revealed that all of the 20 significant world biodiversity targets which had been set 10 years ago had been missed. Every single one. Yes, partial progress towards meeting some of the targets has been made but overall it is a lamentable picture – promises to the natural world had been made ten years ago – and every one of those promises has been broken. And whilst one response to that might have been that it would have been better not to have made the promises in the first place, that is surely not a right or Godly response to something as important as taking care of God's creation.

So one of the things that this morning's gospel may prompt us to reflect on is the ways in which we respond to the call of God on our lives and the extent to which, when we have heard the call, we commit to following and then follow through on the practicalities involved in that commitment.

I don't mean that to sound like an invitation to beat ourselves up – or worse, one another – about all the promises we have made to God and then not carried through properly – we all have lots of those, and God's forgiveness is endless when we ask in faith. But I am wondering what it might have to say to us about how we find we are best motivated to live the practicalities of God's kingdom in the complexities of the 21st century. Are we among those who find plans, targets and goal-setting inspiring and energising (such as will surely be the case if we are going diving, and also indeed if we are working to save species threatened with extinction) – or are we rather among those who prefer to 'go with the flow', whilst allowing, of course, that we need to first discern that the 'flow' is going in the right direction.

In truth, of course, we need both – not only both kinds of people, but indeed each of us needs something of both kinds of approach if our discipleship is to be balanced and well-rounded and able to embrace the whole of life. We need to be able to make plans and promises – and commit to following them through - but we also need to be able to have a sense of aligning ourselves with the will of God, through prayer, study and worship, so that as we are drawn to going with the flow, that flow will, we pray, be in a Godly direction. Our worshipping and prayer lives need to be complemented by the plans and targets of the practicalities, whilst at the same time our promises need to be grounded in our sense of the will of God for our lives – and the more closely entwined those two are the more deeply will our discipleship open us to the fulfilment of both our human lives and the life of God lived through us – the life which is, after all, the whole purpose of for which God's love has created us.

Amen