

Reflection on the Readings for the 26th Sunday of Ordinary Times Year A

Mahatma Gandhi

"Be the change that you wish to see in the world."

I write this reflection today on the Feast of Saint Matthew Apostle and Evangelist and I think about what in particular his gospel and associated readings for this 26th Sunday in Ordinary Time can tell us about Jesus and about ourselves. One of the themes I would like to explore with you today is that of change. I am conscious that Saint Matthew's life can teach us a great deal about change and its important link to his personal conversion and indeed evangelisation. I begin with a more personal story.

Australians, as we know, are great travellers and in the past I myself have been privileged to visit most continents. Whilst I enjoyed the experience I have always looked forward to returning home, the best bits for me were to be found in the planning and expectation of travel. In truth I found the change that comes with actual travel somewhat disconcerting. I felt as if I did not belong, a sojourner in a foreign land, an observer rather than someone who truly belongs, for indeed I was. The problem I observed, was that in travelling, or in fact any move from where I was to somewhere else, didn't really change who I was. Certainly it was an experience, often positive, but for me it only largely changed the view outside my window. I used think I was alone in this regard until I came across an excellent little book by the philosopher and author Alain de Botton called *The Art of Travel*, it is a philosophical look at the ubiquitous but peculiar activity of travelling for pleasure. Well worth a read if you are interested, to whet your appetite he speaks of the benefits of travelling in one's own living room, and the best strategy of leaving some places, even if keenly desired, untraveled.

This experience of travel has been useful in distilling within me the idea that, in my humble opinion, any real change with lasting effect has to come from within not without. I know from my experience of ministry that for many of us this is the most difficult goal to achieve. Think about all those New Year resolutions and other best laid plans that began with good intent but somehow faded as time passed. I am certainly no exception to this human quandary, but today I wanted to share with you one experience I have had which has taught me something important about change and how that even though it is undeniably hard there is still before us the possibility to change despite past failures. This is a very personal sharing, and I relate it just to my

own life, and don't want to leave you with the impression that my experience can necessarily be translated to anyone else's experience, we are all unique.

Five years ago I weighed 126kg, not the heaviest I had been in my life but still the underlying cause of growing range of health issues. Since I was a teenager I had always been big, I used to put it down to factors I couldn't control such as having big bones and heredity factors, there is of course an element of truth in this and that is largely what made that perspective appealing. I became expert in dieting and on several occasions I lost large amounts of weight only to put it all back on again, and some more. You see like my experience of travel even though I was on a personal journey, I remained myself and I took myself with me wherever I went. Then five years ago I developed a heart condition, I will spare you the details, but following two long procedures, one of eight hours and one of six hours, I sat in my cardiologists office, listening, as he shared with me the fact that he viewed our patient doctor relationship as a partnership, he would do all he could, but he was clear that a successful relationship meant that I had to be serious about keeping my side of the bargain and change my lifestyle permanently. Something clicked within my heart and mind that day and I knew that this change had to come from within, I could no longer be an observer, a sojourner, and so the real work of change began, and now five years later I am within a normal weight range for my body mass. I won't pretend it was easy, it wasn't, but I will tell you that until five years ago I had pretty well given up on the idea that this change would ever be possible. What I have come to understand is that change isn't an event, it is a process and for me that process will continue for the rest of my life. There is sound support for this idea of change as process in psychology and counselling practice and some practitioners adopt change as a six stage process, adapted from what is termed the transtheoretical model (TTM), these stages are;

1. *Pre-contemplation,*
2. *Contemplation*
3. *Preparation,*
4. *Action,*
5. *Maintenanceand sometimes;*
6. *Relapse.*

When I look back now I can see that for most of my life I think I was alternating between either stages 1, 2 or 3. For those times when I had gravitated to stages 4 and 5 only to relapse I now find it valuable (and comforting) to see lapse as simply one quite normal part of the change process and treated as an occasion of being a learning opportunity for return to the action and maintenance steps. I think the model has limitations and whilst not perfect it does reinforce the point that change is never just one thing; it's a lot of connected things, and sustained change doesn't happen without a process that considers all of the pieces in unison.

If I have one takeaway message from my experience over the last few years it would have to be connected to my previous reflection of two weeks ago, the 24th Sunday of Ordinary Time. You may recall its theme of forgiveness, which I proposed had various constituents, one of which, that we didn't get to discuss in any detail, and that was the important element of self-forgiveness. A close relative of self-forgiveness is compassion, compassion towards others, and in particular the exercising of a realistic degree of self-compassion. We have all most likely experienced the discomfort of committing to something, some change, and then not following through, it is hard not to be self-critical or think that perhaps we are weak or lazy, or that we do not have enough willpower. I say give yourself a break, exercise a period of quiet reflection and above all practice self-compassion. If you really struggle with this, then hand it over to Jesus who has compassion enough for all of us, and seek professional assistance.

Speaking of Jesus, I suppose by now you may be wondering what all of what I have shared with you thus far has to do with our readings for the 26th Sunday in Ordinary time? Well in order to illustrate this I need to take us on another slight diversion and another experience I have had some years ago back in 1999. I recall the very first unit of study I undertook towards my initial Bachelor of Theology degree. It was a Scripture unit called Introduction to the New Testament. I have to say that it was a formative moment for me and since then I have been unable to read any scripture passage without remembering what I was taught that day. The teaching was to look at any passage and ask three questions. Where has text come from, what might the words mean, how is it to be used today. We call this the three worlds of the Text. Very much in summary I share them with you today.

1. **The World Behind the Text** examines things like the history, geography, social systems, conventions and cultures. It is trying to understand a world so different from our own, the writers reason for writing, looking at what might be going on in the writers world and who they were writing for at that particular time. It is also incorporating a handed down oral tradition and writing from the memory of events which may have happened some forty or fifty years prior.
2. **The World of the Text** invites us to analyse the texts, the words, themselves. Here we are looking at genre, tone, how the parts fit together or not, themes, arguments, expected responses and so on.
3. **The World in Front of the Text** looking at where the focus now turns from the writers world to our contemporary times. Here we ask the question how are we to apply these texts to our lives today? How should the text shape us now and into the future.

So then taking today's gospel passage and the parable of the two sons immediately we are thrown into an issue important within the field of study called cultural anthropology, the study of human societies and cultures and their development down through the ages. This is a subset of the ***world behind the text***. It contains the notion that the culture of Jesus's milieu was very much different from western culture

today, but not so far different from what we might expect in say Syria or Iran or even places like Japan today. Whilst our culture is largely based on guilt/innocence, and some other parts of the world on fear/power, the evangelist Matthew is writing from within a culture based on honour/shame. If you went to a village in the Middle East at that time and told the people this story of the two sons than I would hazard a guess that the majority would favour the response of the son who said yes to his father even though he did not go to work in the vineyard. He would be considered by the villagers as the better son, because the son's reply was the most honourable and respectful. This is one reason I think Jesus's response is so amazing. Culture would have dictated that the second son who said yes to his father but didn't follow through would have done the right and honourable thing, in an honour shame culture you simply do not say no to your father, you and your father would be shamed by this dishonourable action. Jesus says however the son who was apparently honest and said no upfront, but then later had a change of heart, did the right thing by the father. This was just so counter cultural. When we look further into this passage through the lens of the *world of the text* as distinct from that of that *behind the text* we need to understand that one of the key goals of Matthew's gospel was to show the readers that Jesus is in fact the long awaited Messiah and had all authority. Some accepted this but many of the leaders did not and they rejected Jesus, Matthew illustrates in this and other parables the challenge and response to Jesus's authority. Matthew aligns the second son with those leaders who said yes, showed rightful obedience, but did not in fact do the will of the Father (God). It is perhaps here that we should look at the connection of this gospel reading with that of our first reading from Ezekiel. As we have said the first son has a change of heart and mind, Ezekiel is reminding us today that if you are turning away from wickedness you are in fact turning toward God. This validates the action of the first son as the right action.

Now I hope we are in a position to more easily make those connections to my earlier commentary, this change of mind and disposition is what spiritual writers down through the ages have called conversion. In an age where culture was governed by honour and shame Ezekiel stands apart as a prophet who insists on the primacy of the individual response rather than that of communal responsibility. The central teaching is that any individual should be free at any time to turn towards righteousness or not, and that person will be judged by the new life to which he or she has turned, not by his or her previous life or by the actions of others. So Jesus turns the world upside down, the toll collectors and harlots are like the first son, who at first didn't respond with yes but ultimately changed and were converted into doing what was pleasing to God. The chief priests and elders are like the second son, they too heard the Word, they also had the added advantage of seeing the responses of the toll collectors and harlots. They gave an honourable response, but that was simply not enough, there

was no real change or conversion, and their response in fact masked an exercise of rejection. They were paying lip service.

Changing one's mind, choosing conversion of self, is a matter of complete honesty with oneself, with God, and with others, this helps mitigate the problem of hypocrisy. Yes change is difficult for everyone; it is even more difficult to change long held core values, beliefs, attitudes or behaviours. However as difficult as this change is, our readings today remind us that it is an essential element of Christian discipleship. Surely Saint Matthew in writing what he did for us, must have thought long and hard about his own life's journey, surely he himself can attest to the challenges of transitioning from being at one time in his life a publican lackey, extorting money on behalf of the hated occupiers of a sacred land, and then going through the challenging change and conversion process required in order to truly respond to that momentous command, "Come Follow Me", becoming an Apostle of Jesus Christ and a powerful evangelist who continues through God's Holy Word to speak to us today.

Where does all this commentary takes us? Well personally I don't think it would be a great stretch of the imagination to align the TTM process of change model we discussed earlier with that of the process of spiritual conversion. James Prochaska and Carlo Di Clemente introduced us to their Transtheoretical Model of change back in 1982, and I think these same principles can be applied to our self-conversion and evangelistic efforts. Just as there are stages in the model that can be applied to weight loss, etc, there are not dissimilar stages of spiritual growth. Of course deciding to follow Christ isn't just a lifestyle change, it is a complete life change. Once we decide to follow Christ it involves us in a continuous process of change, you and I call this change sanctification and it is a journey that never ends. However let me leave you with the thought that we have the most powerful aid we can possible imagine on our side, as the priest and writer Fr. Richard Rohr identifies, "God does not love us if we change, God loves us so that we can change."

Lest we lose heart, lest we think we cannot really change our ways, lest we think we have gone too far away, lest we think our nearest and dearest ones cannot be changed or converted, lest we think we don't have the power of change within us, just remember.... that conversion process is a work of divine sovereign Grace. Respectful of freedom, just keep on praying against any resistance. We know that God's Grace is always free and unmerited and it comes with power and authority and above all is in its very essence triumphant love!

"God's greatest attribute is not his power, though it is omniscience; not his glory, though it is burning majesty: it is his love." Al Bryant