

Sermon on Luke 13: 1-9

The Fruit of Not Fixing

Recently a friend of mine put a note up on a social media platform to gain wisdom from others about a dilemma he was facing.

A member of his family had observed a woman climbing out of a clothing bin near his house early one morning.

Clearly, she had slept there over night, though there was no way of telling whether this was a common practice for her.

So my friend wanted some suggestions as to what he might do in this situation, how he might help.

All the normal ideas were put forward about leaving food, or trying to talk to her, or offering her assistance.

A couple of people spoke about creating a relationship, being a friend and the like.

Broadly speaking, it was possible to sort the responses into two categories.

There were those who saw in the first place the problems, and those who saw in the first place the person.

Those who saw the problems, wanted to fix them – the problem is she doesn't have any food, so let's get some, the problem is she doesn't have a place to sleep, so let's find one.

Those who saw the person wanted to connect – let's get to know her, let's speak to her, let's be with her and build a relationship.

They saw the person before they saw the problem.

This is, of course, a somewhat unfair description.

It's not quite so neat and simple as that, and the woman clearly did have pressing and immediate needs.

But perhaps that simple scene raises a question we do well to ponder for a bit, especially in Lent.

When we look at God, when we think about Jesus, when we examine ourselves and consider what it means to be a people of faith, how do we see?

Through what lens do we look?

Do we in the first place see problems, and allow our thinking, our actions, our responses, our view of God and ourselves to be shaped accordingly?

Or do we see the person?

Do we see scarcity?

Or opportunity to build relationship, even to grow, even to receive the gift of Christ in another?

Do we see the person of Jesus, the Son of God walking among us, the person next to us in the pew today, the person who sleeps in the clothing bin, the depth of the person we are in ourselves, and allow the rest to flow from that way of seeing?

From that way of understanding faith and the life of discipleship?

The reality is we often fall into the trap of seeing the problem rather than the person.

Ministers can be particularly bad at this.

Here's a church that needs fixing, a relationship that needs fixing, a homeless person who needs fixing, a whole world that needs fixing.

I make this mistake sometimes when people come to the church looking for financial help.

I quickly and efficiently ask them the standard questions about why they need it and what it's for and whether a food voucher will work better.

They present the problem and I fix it, at least in a way which means they will leave me alone until next time.

Why don't I take the time to invite them in?

To offer a cup of coffee and a conversation to actually start to build a relationship and see the person behind the problem?

Why don't I look for the face of Christ in them and see how they might be a help to me in their coming?

The fix it instinct runs deep alright.

Of course, the corollary of seeing the problem rather than the person is the assumption that whatever the problem is, I have the solution.

It's okay because help is close at hand.

When we go to fix a situation we don't do so thinking, I've got nothing to help here.

We assume that we have the wherewithal or the resources or the wisdom to know what's required.

And that makes us feel good.

In other words, our superiority as the 'fixer' is built in.

I remember a friend of mine telling me the story of when she was made redundant.

She went home and her father was there and as she cried and lamented this sudden and unexpected shift in her situation, and as she did he went off to get the paper to help her look for jobs.

Right there and then.

Not exactly what she needed at that point.

But again reflective of seeing the problem not the person and of the assumption of superiority.

What she needed was a listening ear, a sympathetic presence.

What she needed was simply someone to just be with her.

To live the relationship as a friend, not a solution.

If we reflect on Christian history for a moment, how much of the Christian endeavour has been based on the idea of seeing a problem and wanting to fix it?

It took until the 2nd half of the 20th C, for instance, for the aid industry to realise that simply importing western methods into struggling contexts without any real relationship could actually make long term recovery harder.

The will to fix the problem and to assume we had the answers could actually make the problem worse in such a complex context.

Now again, I'm being somewhat unfair in characterising it so starkly.

Of course the Gospel calls us to help those in need and to do what we can to love people in practical ways with what we have.

We only need to bring to mind the story of the Good Samaritan to remember that helping those in need is part of what faith is about.

Yet perhaps the question is what lens frames everything else?

What do we see in the first place is the most important thing which shapes the whole?

Being with others?

Or working for others?

Seeing first the problem or the person?

Sam Wells has recently written a book where he argues that ‘with’ rather than ‘for’ is the most important word in theology, in our understanding of our own faith.

And that actually when we look at Jesus’ story, God’s will that we not be isolated and alone is how the rest of the story, including the salvation wrought through the cross, is framed.

‘Jesus was Immanuel’, Wells says, ‘before he was saviour.’

While it may seem somewhat artificial to separate the two things like that, it is still a telling challenge to the conventional way we usually frame our relationship with God, the way we understand the mission of God.

God’s desire, Wells says, is to be with us, never to see us alone.

And it is out of this deeply relational holy impulse, that God chooses to save us by seeing that we are not alone at our most isolated moment, in death.

In fact, God loves us so much that Jesus will be left alone on the cross in order that we won’t be.

God sees in us first not a problem to be fixed, but the beloved child to be cherished.

What else might we expect from a God whose very being in three persons is patterned in loving relationship.

God in Godself is the eternal and everlasting 'with'.

'There is no goal beyond restored relationships', Wells writes, 'being with is not a means to an end.' It is the end, the purpose, and the mission of God.

Whether or not you agree with this kind of framing, and it's certainly possible to make counter points, we can't deny that this way of thinking snaps at our theological heels.

In the Gospel passage today we have the famous image of the fig tree which is not producing fruit and is about to be cut down and the gardener says give it one more year and I'll see what I can do.

In the church we're used to seeing fruit in terms of programs, numbers, activities.

We want to measure the size of the fruit rather than taste it.

Again ministers are hopeless at this.

How big, what successes, what conversions, what income, etc etc, these are the questions we like to ask, as if all four years at theological college taught us to do was count.

The kind of fruit Wells is on about and about which he claims the Kingdom of God is, is measured more in how well we are with each other, with the rejected and despised of the world, with our community, and of course with God.

Maybe a church *for* all people needs to become a church *with* all people?

And not so that we can feel like we're helping (though hopefully we are??), but rather that in approaching each other and the world on equal terms, we might just find our lives are enriched in faith, encounter, and relationship.

We might just find that the time to be with others instead of being for them is a holy time of growth for us?

We might just find Jesus in unexpected places?

We might just learn to see the person, not the problem?

The thing about seeing the person before the problem, seeing 'with' as before 'for', resisting the urge to fix in favour of relating humanly is that it takes time and attentiveness.

And if we're honest this is hard.

Give me another year, the gardener says, and I will tend the tree and fertilize it.

But that's another whole year of time, energy, effort, possible disappointment.

And there's no guarantee it will bear fruit in the end.

We need to remember that seeing the person before the problem doesn't mean the person won't end up being a problem.

The prodigal father seeks to uphold the relationship with his resentful older son but we're never told if the relationship holds and grows in the end.

God comes to be with the world, but the world still rejects him.

In the first place, though, it takes time.

It takes time and faith to sit and be and listen and engage and be attentive.

It can't happen from a distance, it can't happen on remote.

This is why fixing the problem is actually the easier option.

We don't really need to engage with the person, we just need to solve the immediate issue which could be as easy as giving them food when they knock on the door.

Perhaps the reason we're all so time poor these days is because we've forgotten that being with others takes time.

Perhaps if we slowed down a bit, we might find we actually seemed to have more time.

Taking the time and attentiveness to be with others has another drawback which is that most of the time no-one else will know about it, another thing we like to happen – we'll do good as long as it's public enough to let others see us doing good.

After all the church is supposed to be the light of the world, what good is a light which can't be seen.

Yet most of the time 'being with' will happen behind closed doors so to speak, in coffee shops, or parks, on walks, or in homes.

Mostly it won't be visible, except to the person, and except to God.

None of what I'm saying is supposed to make us feel guilty about what we do for others.

The lines are always blurry and sometimes helping to fix something can be the conduit to a deeper relationship.

Sometimes an act of small kindness can be the pathway to deeper engagement.

But asking ourselves what comes first, what frames our approach and faith is an important question.

Wells wants to say that for God the first move is to be with us in Jesus, to love us by walking along side us, and through that being with, Jesus ultimately saves us through the cross and resurrection.

In death, Jesus won't forsake us, even as he is forsaken.

He goes on to say this, 'We want the Jesus that comes down from the cross, the Jesus that rights wrongs, ends pain, corrects injustice... we want solutions, we want our problems fixed... but what humankind needs is a love that sticks around, a love that stays put, a love that hangs on. That's what the cross is. A love that hangs on.'

And this is the God we are called to imitate.

We are invited to bear the fruit of not fixing, to see the person before the problem, to see Jesus before that which separates us from him, to take the time and be attentive to God and to others.

A Church with all people.

And in this to find the hope of relationship with our creator through faith.

"There is hope for the people of the cross for the darkness leads to the dawn, the night to the day, and death gives way to life, forevermore, Amen."

Amen.