

Rector's Sermon: Trinity 2 (21 June)

It is so easy in our divided world, with so much of our public discourse being binary in nature, to be, or appear to be, scandalised. One only needs to spend a little time on Social Media to see that in action and it can be viewed as a sign of our present propensity to run away from or avoid complexity preferring instead to force our own world view on others rather than listening and learning from the other's story.

Today I want to contrast that with how we observe Jesus behaving in the Gospels; that, unlike us, time and again Jesus absolutely refused to be scandalised. He may have got angry, he may have told truth to power, but I would argue that he utterly refused to be scandalised. Let me elaborate.

First, he refused to be scandalised by the very everyday variety sinners. Indeed, Jesus was often seen in company with them: prostitutes, whose only commodity was themselves, or tax collectors who ripped people off. Jesus knew full well what they were up to; he never countenanced their behaviour, but he never ever rejected them either.

Nor was Jesus scandalised by victims, by the powerless in his world. These included the marginalised, all the literal and metaphorical lepers who were shunned by self-proclaimed righteous people, sometimes for reasons that appeared religious. With such victims he kept company, and he did what he could to help them.

Jesus wasn't scandalised by any of these people. So, as a result, some people were scandalised by him. These were the authorities, the people who sat at the top table, the self-proclaimed righteous people. They resented, very much, his refusal to be scandalised. For their world depended on some people being dismissed as rejects so that others could enjoy huge advantages. It was very much a win-lose system.

It's too bad they acted that way. Besides doing harm to others, they did enormous harm to themselves: they missed out on a blessing, they missed out on grace.

Elsewhere in Matthew's Gospel we hear how John the Baptist, while still in prison, sent messengers to ask Jesus whether he was indeed the expected messiah. It seems that even John was starting to have doubts. Jesus sent the messengers back to John. They were to tell him what they had found out. Jesus was not scandalized by rejects; he was busy helping them. He met this messianic requirement. Then he added that blessed indeed is anyone who takes no offense at this, anyone not scandalised by what he was doing.

Jesus was not scandalised by sinners and victims. But more than that, Jesus was not even scandalised by the victimisers. He knew what they were up to. Jesus publicly criticised them, he

called out their behaviour, and he watched his back, but he was not shocked or surprised. He recognised that, like their victims, these victimisers also lacked freedom. Their power, their prestige, their pride may have kept them ignorant, but they were enslaved by their own injustice. They had crashed, they had burned, but they simply did not know it.

Jesus refused to be scandalised. Jesus never ever lost sight of the inherent dignity of all whom he encountered, whether they be victim or victimiser. This scandalised others and so they launched a conspiracy that would carry Jesus to his death and to resurrection.

What about his disciples, both his first followers and us? Jesus invites us not to be scandalised by anyone. And he warns us that by living in this way, we will scandalise other people, those who draw dividends from an unjust world.

Admittedly, Jesus is asking a lot of us. He tells us to subvert the system. We are not to become players in the world's most popular game, where people are categorised as either victim or victimiser, the one who rejects or the one rejected. Or to put it differently, we live in a world that lives in fear, where we fear our enemies and if we appear to have no enemies, we manufacture some so that game, with its loaded dice goes on.

Jesus tells us not have enemies. If others see us as theirs, that's their problem, but we are not to treat them as enemies, as opponents, as effective threats. We are not to be scandalised by them. We are not to play that game.

Thus we do not permit others to define who we are. We refuse to travel this way of fear.

Rather, our identity and image comes to us from God. We are his children; we are of infinite value; we are free from the scandal system. And whether or not we know it, this identity is available to absolutely everybody else as well.

Accepting this is not easy. We have to die to the old way, the old identity, governed as it is by scandal and fear and death. We make this escape by being baptised into Christ. We live a life loyal to our baptism as we die repeatedly to the world's way, to our old identities, to the trap of scandal and fear. We live in a way oriented to God, the One who sees us as his children, who graces us with life. This is the way of the cross: dying to the world of death that we may live the abundant life for which we exist.

To some, this life, with its demands for forgiveness, sounds impossible. Others imagine it as unbearably weak. The truth is just the opposite.

Forgiveness contains the strength of God. Forgiveness means we refuse to be imprisoned in the scandals of this world. We refuse to be remade by the evil done to us. We reject the stifling identity a win-lose world would thrust upon us. We accept instead our identity that comes from God. Because we are God's children, manifesting the divine image and likeness, we are free not to be scandalised. We are able to forgive others, that they too may be free.

None of this is easy. But it's the only way out of the darkness. It's the only way into the light that waits to welcome us all. The Christian faith calls us to maturity. It calls us to grow up.

So what we are here for, on this Sunday morning in June, is to renew our commitment not to be caught by the scandal system, not to allow the world to define us. We are here to renew our discipleship.

It's all quite subversive, of course. Today we celebrate how victimisation and force do not have a future, that death doesn't reign here anymore. We refuse to be scandalised. Rather we embrace our call to discover and celebrate the God given image in the other. We seek their flourishing. We renew our Trinitarian calling to create and be part of loving, dynamic community. We rejoice, today and always, that we are beloved daughters and sons of the God of life, the children of the resurrection. We rejoice that we are the Body of Christ. Amen.