

Second Chances

I Samuel 15:34 – 16:13; Mark 4:26-34

In 1981 Dora Wilson looked out of her window and saw some men loading her neighbour's priceless Persian carpets into a van. "What are you doing?" she called. "We're taking them to be cleaned," the men replied. "Will you take mine too?" she asked. They did, and she never saw them again.¹

Ever done something that as soon as you did it, you regretted it? Ever said something to someone that as soon as you said it, you knew it came out all wrong, or was not what you intended, or **was** what you intended but on reflection is simply showed your own lack of grace, or your ignorance, or the smallness of your mind and approach to life? Lord knows that fits me, and I don't flatter myself that I'm the only one here in Church this morning who is in need of God's grace, God's forgiveness, alongside the grace and forgiveness of the people we've hurt or harmed or upset.

One of the frustrating things about journeying along life's way is that, even with the tiniest bit of hindsight, we are all stunned at how often we still get it wrong. And this is a trait as old as humankind. The people of Israel, sort of rejecting God, deciding they want a king to rule them instead of God and God's representatives the prophets, forced Samuel to find a king for them. He went for Saul, young, strong, a warrior, your basic king-like material.

Except he wasn't. Impetuous. Prone to jealousy and depression. Uncontrollable fits of anger. The people were terrified. As God and Samuel predicted, though both had been involved in bringing Saul to kingship. It became clear that it was time for a new beginning; a fresh start. It was time for a second chance.

Had the lessons been learned? The prophet Samuel was sent out again to find the person who would be the next King, already selected by God. It was a highly dangerous mission. If Saul heard about it, it would not go well. Saul goes to Bethlehem, a few miles outside Jerusalem (but this was before Jerusalem was a great city, and before the Temple had been built). He meets a local chieftain, a man called Jesse. He had several sons. Samuel thought, maybe the oldest, or the tallest, or the strongest looking. God gently gives Samuel a second chance, and another, and another. God says, "Do not look on his appearance, or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the Lord sees not as man sees; man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart."

Until, after a parade of candidates and second chances, David. The shepherd boy, the least likely. Healthy, beautiful eyes, but not the one you would have picked out of a line-up.

God did.

The Samuel was given a second chance, to pick a king. The people of Israel would in time be given a second chance, to follow this young boy who would become their king. And it is no small irony that David, that complex, brilliant, terrible individual would, throughout his life, be given second chances. A model of God's grace to broken individuals; an example of how God does not judge by appearances, and for Whom nobody was worthless and to be cast aside because of their flawed natures. Everyone deserves a second chance; nobody should be judged only by appearances.

That lies at the heart of some of Jesus' parables – those challenging stories with layers of meaning that were told to make us think and wonder and question and wrestle with what Jesus really meant about God and God's Kingdom. Take the parable of the mustard seed – proverbially if not literally the smallest of all seeds. Who would have thought it might grow into

anything of significance? Yet it does. If you judged it by its smallness, you wouldn't have thought it would have amounted to much. But when it is planted, and tended, it grows into something far beyond its original appearance. It merits a second chance, to be allowed to thrive.

If that's true of things, how much more true is it of people? How true is it for us, for where would any of us be without the second chance that we needed to start again, prove that we could do better and be better? That's the good news of the gospel of Jesus. We get a second chance. Where once it was one strike and you're out, because of Jesus, there is hope beyond the muck-up that we sometimes make of our lives through our words or our actions.

And if that is true for our relationship with God – might it also be true in the way we handle the relationships around us? How ready are we to give second chances to the people who blot their copy books around us? Who get it wrong? Who cut us to the quick with their ungracious words, or their selfish actions? If we have no chance of hope without the second chance God gives us, might there not be an example for us in that in the way we treat our fellow humans? It is surely what Jesus would have done. James and John, second chances. The woman by the well at Samaria, second chances. Peter, second chances. The woman taken in adultery, second chances. Christianity is the religion of the second chance. That is its great strength, and that is our great hope.

A few weeks ago I shared with you the words of the American lawyer, Bryan Stevenson, working with some of the most difficult people in the US justice system:

*Each of us is more than the worst thing we've ever done. Someone who tells a lie is not just a liar; someone who takes something that doesn't belong to them is not just a thief; someone who kills someone else is not just a killer.*²¹

Isn't that precisely the second chance? Isn't that precisely the ethic of being seen for more than just the amalgamation of fault and error, sin and brokenness? Isn't that precisely what Jesus came to teach and to model and to expect?

Above the door to the chapel at Cornton Vale's prison for women in Stirling are these words:

*"We cannot change yesterday,
We can only make the most of today,
And look forward with hope towards tomorrow."*

Our loving God, through Jesus Christ, says that to every one of us. He knows our past, and forgives it. All of it, when we at last turn to Him. He knows that we try and don't always make it or get it right. And He still loves us. And He knows that we are worth more than all our broken yesterdays, because He help us towards the bright tomorrows through the challenges of our difficult today's.

This is the gospel of Jesus Christ. This is the good news that makes our lives worth living. This is the grace of our heavenly Father. This is the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

The God of the second chance. For you; for me; today; and tomorrow.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen

ⁱ Spill the Beans Issue 4 2012 p21

ⁱⁱ Bryan Stevenson, Just Mercy, p17