

Sermon for Trinity 17. Malcolm Grundy.

It is likely that many of you will have seen the Two Ronnies *Mastermind* sketch about answering questions in the wrong order. It is still available on *YouTube*. Ronnie Corbet is one question out of step. So, it goes, 'What is palaeontology?', 'yes, that is my name', next question, 'What is Burke's Peerage?', answer, 'A study of old fossils' and so on . . .

In a very big way, it is that kind of mismatch which we are asked to look at in today's readings. When St Paul is writing to the Philippians, he is trying to remedy their dislocated questions. He is saying that they should not be looking for the ways in which God rewards their faith but seeing how they were helped by this Christ in times of trouble in unanticipated ways. If they get it wrong, he says, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom.

In just the same way Jesus in our Gospel tells this long story about the tenants of the vineyard who were thinking of themselves first and about how they might get their reward. He is actually saying in the story of them killing the messengers and then the son that they were leaping to a wrong conclusion because they were asking the wrong question.

As a church we have long been accused of giving answers to yesterday's questions. I have noticed one fault in our or any pre-recorded services. The preacher composing a sermon on Tuesday or Wednesday is answering the question before the one which needs to be asked by the Sunday, myself included!

Most immediately Michaelmas was celebrated last week, and we have missed the ordinations of Deacons and Priests and the commissioning of Readers. From the days when I selected and presented candidates, I have missed the stories of their special calling. I have missed their way of saying in their own words how 'Jesus had called them o'er the tumult'. Earlier versions of verse 12 in our Epistle have a better way of describing the nature of vocation: *I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me.* Or even better, in his very literary spiritual gem 'Yes to God' Alan Ecclestone says of this call and response, 'He set out to look for us, long before it occurred us to look for him'.

Both Paul and Matthew are saying faith questions in the right order do not begin with, 'how can I get God to favour me but what is it, at any stage in life, that God wants me to do?'. They tell us that it is faith tempered by experience - that it is through sharing in the Christ-like sufferings of this world and the search for new and fruitful solutions that God's right questions to us can be heard. Those who have been through trouble and rejection know only too well the depth of right answer at the heart of today's gospel, 'The stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone'.

So, we too need to be cautious of applying old answers to new questions. Let me turn the Two Ronnies' Burke's Peerage sketch around for us clergy and perhaps our church and ask, 'What is Crockford's Clerical Directory?', and hope the answer is not 'A study of old fossils'.

Amen.