

08, April 20, SNC

STARTING WITH OURSELVES

Luke 6: 37 - 49

There is an old Irish story that is told about the time when the gospel first began to be preached on the Emerald Isle. A young woman asked her elders to tell her the ancient stories about Irish heroes like Fionn, Cúchulainn, and Finn McCool.

Now her elders had become Christians and they warned her against such stories - that she would put her soul in jeopardy by listening to that heathen nonsense about people who had never existed.

Even as they spoke, they heard hoof beats and saw a cloud of dust, and those who knew the old stories knew that this was Finn McCool and his army, the Fianna, who were on their way.

From another direction they heard singing - it was Patrick and his followers approaching. The elders said to the woman - now you just watch - Patrick will put an end to Finn and his army.

Well, everyone watching was astonished when they saw Patrick, the monk, approaching Finn the soldier and inviting him to sit down under a tree and spin for him the ancient tales of Ireland.

Patrick in his turn told Bible stories, and to this day they say this is the reason that ancient Irish tales and bible stories are told alongside of one another in Ireland.

What a wonderful world it would be if different and opposite peoples would listen to one another. How wonderful it would be if those nearest and dearest to us would hear us, listen to us. What can we do that will make people listen?

And in a world with so many voices of faith, we wonder how we can make the Christian voice heard, what can we do so that people will listen?

How to make people listen is the fundamental question underlying today's scripture. Jesus answer is

If we want to convey something to other people, we don't start by pointing fingers at them. We need to begin with ourselves - learn our own lesson and live it. Patrick wanted McCool to listen, so Patrick sat down and listened.

Put yourself right, says Jesus - deal with your own stuff first. He pokes fun at our trying to teach and improve another, before we've done that work on ourselves - We do it under the guise of friendship.

We say my friend, honey, dear, there's a little splinter that I can see in your eye - doesn't it bother you - can't I help you to take it out. Jesus says - fat chance you've got of removing a splinter from someone else's eye - you can't see at all to do so, because you've got a great big two by four sticking out of your own eye.

The point he makes is pretty clear - if we want to change another, if we want to make this world a better place, if we want to be heard, we need to start with ourselves.

Others will gain from seeing our struggle, and how we come through

Some time ago we had a guest speaker come to our church to do a workshop on Burnout - Kelly Walker. He said his strongest credential for teaching about burnout was that he had burned out and had survived.

He said, I have had this disease, where the little child in me was shamed and so I built a frantic way of working and achieving to compensate for that emptiness inside, but then this thing I had constructed just collapsed in on me.

And we listened because we knew that he knew what he was talking about. He told us that there was a way through and beyond. And we believed him because we saw his vitality and energy and passion. He was living proof of what he spoke about and so he carried authority.

Like the power of Jesus teaching after the resurrection. Before that point his friends just didn't believe him, either about his having to die or about coming back after three days.

But when he had gone that journey - through terrible suffering and death, then they saw with their own eyes, and when he actually appeared again, that was when they learnt what Jesus wanted them to - it was only then that they knew that they were able to face all things.

Because Jesus had gone on this journey ahead of them, they could learn from him. Speaking about what we know through our own journey carries the greatest weight.

The experts tell us that the key to communicating our wisdom to others is to avoid the little word 'you'. "You" is such a comfortable word - if you would only do such and such, your problems, or OUR problems would be solved. I wish you would be more..why don't you, ....I wish you would, ....couldn't you perhaps....

Couples who are learning how to communicate in the midst of conflict are taught to make only "I" statements. - Not, you make me angry, but rather, when this happens, then I feel angry, because....

We shouldn't presume to tell another person about themselves - only speak of what WE know, which is ourselves. We're taught the same technique in learning to live and communicate with our teenagers. No accusations, only "I" statements. Which is very difficult of course when we can see clearly how another is going wrong.

Jesus says, start with yourself. That will keep communication open.

Most of us find it hard to take a really honest look inside ourselves - to examine ourselves; it's easier to blame and criticise others. Psychologists tell us to be wary of those things that we criticise strongly in other people. These are likely to be the very things we can't face in ourselves - this is called our shadow self - the parts of ourself that we find hard to accept.

And then there is Harville Hendrix. He's written a book for couples and a book for singles. He's very concerned to help couples to stay together rather than quit when the going gets tough.

He reckons we can do so when we understand the simple fact that we have married our parents- we have married someone with both the good and the bad aspects of our parents, so that we can work out stuff through them that we never worked out in our younger days.

Love, he says, is the great anaesthetic that allows us to bond with a person whom we would never choose, if we had all our rational faculties working, but we need this person because they have personality traits that we need in ourselves.

Once we recognise that what seems to be a problem with our partner is really a problem in ourselves, we can do just as Jesus so wisely recommended two thousand years ago - we can deal with our own stuff.

And then there is a real chance of harmony in a relationship.

On the one hand, many of us are pretty reluctant to do this - to admit the problem is ours - naturally, we don't like to see ourselves as weak or having failed in some way, but unless we do so, not only will we not grow, but we'll never get beyond the bumps in our relationships.

On the other hand, there are some of us who are brilliant at finding that 2 by 4 in our own eye, and we're especially good at beating ourselves over the head with it, before anybody else does.

I don't believe that that is the point of Jesus teaching - to make us all feel rotten. the point of his teaching is quite the opposite - it's to give us a sense of power. rather than sink into bitterness and helplessness blaming, we are pointed to a way of proceeding that can really change a situation.

We're offered a way of reducing conflict and bringing about harmony. A starting point. Ourselves. We're invited on a journey - an inner journey- through which we will gain authenticity, authority. We're offered a way of opening other people's ears, both to the word of God and to ourselves.

Starting with ourselves, taking responsibility for ourselves first, will lead to that kind of harmonious living where opposite people may sit down together under a tree, and listen and learn from one another's stories, where each will be heard, because each speaks only of what we know. Starting with ourselves is a first step towards harmony in the world.

To God be all the praise, the honour and the glory, Amen.