

Proper 21
Leicester Cathedral : Sunday 28th September 2008

Holidays bring out the Grumpy Old Man in me. (Actually, lots of things bring out the Grumpy Old Man in me, but holidays seem to have a particular effect.)

The problem is that I have what seems to be a rather bizarre approach to holidays.

If I venture to another country, I do so because I want to experience something of that country's culture; I want to sample a different way of life, perhaps a different *pace* of life, and taste a different cuisine. If I like it, it will make a refreshing change; if I dislike it, at least I will have broadened my horizons and on returning home I'll probably appreciate all the more the British way of doing things.

This approach to holidays is clearly not shared by many of my fellow holiday-makers, as my recent sojourn to the Greek Island of Kefalonia demonstrated.

Sitting one day in a Taverna, eating my Moussakka to the strains of Leonna Lewis, I overheard one of the guests (of Scandinavian origin, I think) ask one of the waiters why they didn't play Greek music. ("Hear Hear", I thought to myself). "Ah", said the waiter, casting what looked like an accusatory glance in my direction, "The British tourists, they complain and ask for the music they get at home."

On another occasion in a shop, I overheard a British woman complain to her husband that the shop assistant's English wasn't really up to scratch. I was sorely tempted to enquire as to the standard of her Greek.

Then, in another Taverna I overheard this priceless comment. "I don't want anything Greek. I'll have to have one of the English dishes. I can't decide whether to go for Pizza or Chicken Curry."

Finally, the piece de resistance; having fallen victim to the collapse of XL Travel, several hundred of us had to be rescued by the Civil Aviation Authority's airlift operation - something that I assure you didn't feel anywhere near as dramatic and exciting as it sounds.

As we waited at the airport for our rescue plane, courtesy of British Midland, we learnt that the flight had been delayed by four hours. A woman in the check-in queue then said to me, "This is the first time I've been to Greece, and after this palaver it will definitely be the last!"

My remonstrations that it was a British tour company that had gone bust and a British airline that was now keeping us waiting cut little ice.

So it seems that British colonialism is alive and well!

But the amateur psychologist in me knows that this apparent superiority, this readiness to patronise, this need to impose our lifestyle and values on others, actually stems from our island mentality.

The truth is that many of us feel insecure when we venture abroad; a different culture can be threatening, so it's easier to surround ourselves with familiar reminders of home and to mock or put down those things that we least understand or by which we're most threatened.

When we recognise that this is happening and see this behaviour for what it is, we're more likely to break the pattern. Self-awareness is a wonderful and transforming thing.

In today's Gospel, as elsewhere in the Gospels, the chief priests and elders are being their usual self-righteous, all-important selves, and they throw down a challenge to Jesus. "By what authority are you doing all the things you're doing? Who gave you this authority?"

Jesus, of course, is having none of it, and throws a trick question back to them. "By what authority did John the Baptist do what he did? Did his authority come from Heaven or was it of human origin?"

The chief priests are well and truly scuppered. They know that John the Baptist is popular with the crowds, so if they dismiss his authority, they risk being lynched. On the other hand, if they acknowledge that John *did* preach with authority, they can be challenged as to why they didn't listen to him. So they limply reply that they don't know, and Jesus likewise refuses to answer their question.

It's very clear for all to see that the religious leaders feel threatened by Jesus, by his radicalism and his different outlook and style. Their arrogance, their desperate attempts to prove their authority and their superiority stem from a profound insecurity.

And they have good reason to feel insecure.

Jesus demonstrates this in the parable that he then goes on to tell.

On the one hand there's the son who initially refuses his father's request that he should go to the vineyard but later changes his mind; then there's the son who promises that he will go but didn't.

The message is clear. Those who falter in responding to God's message, but who later repent, turn around and do God's will, will get into the Kingdom of God.

But those who hypocritically pretend to do God's will but don't allow themselves to be changed or turned around by His word, will find it harder.

Jesus obviously sees the chief priests and elders in this latter category, and if they have any self-awareness at-all, they themselves will recognise this.

Essentially this is a parable about honesty. It's about being honest with ourselves and honest with God. It's about being big enough and humble enough to recognise and own up to our weaknesses and failings rather than assuming a false confidence and certainty.

When we are truthful with ourselves, we can begin to live better with and within ourselves and that enables us to live better with others.

That wonderful teaching of Jesus about removing the log in our own eye before we worry about the speck in our brother's eye, cuts right to the heart of this. We shouldn't spend our time being superior, trying to prove that we're holier or more worthy than the next person, making others suffer because of our neurosis. Instead we should just get on with living our own life before God as honestly as we can, allowing God to re-shape us and turn us around as necessary.

St Paul picks up this theme in his letter to the Phillipians. "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit" he says, "but in humility regard others as better than yourselves".

As Paul goes on to explain, this is exactly the model of behaviour that Jesus adopted. Though he was God, he was nevertheless happy to live a simple, humble life, coming as a servant rather than a king.

This was the total opposite of how the religious leaders of Jesus' time behaved. They very obviously regarded themselves as superior to everyone else and they seized on every opportunity to demonstrate their supposed spiritual elitism.

So many of the tensions in the world, whether it's conflict between individuals or between nations stem from our insecurity, our inability to cope with those who are different. Too often this insecurity is manifested in a high-handed self-importance which insists on imposing our views on others, or, worse, is allowed to explode into out-and-out xenophobia or whatever other ism or phobia it might be.

Tragically, this is also true of so much of the tension in the life of the church, the very place where the model of humility ought to be most lived-out.

So many of our debates and squabbles are based on the premise, "I'm right, you 're wrong and I must have my own way because God is on my side".

To take the "holier than thou" stance, "I do God's will but you don't", is perilously close to that taken by the chief priests in the Gospel. On the other hand, surely it is possible to hold a viewpoint passionately and with conviction and yet to also have the humility to respect those with whom you disagree, regarding them as better than yourself rather than inferior. This is much more in line with the teachings of both Jesus and Paul.

If you want a name for it, you could call it "Biblical Morality".

Amen.