

REAL FAITH CAN'T BE FORCED

Matthew 5:14-20

2 Chronicles 34: 1-7, 29-33

During the hymn before the sermon, ask everyone to move to a different seat. Did they like that? Did they mind? If they did, why? Was it because it was pretty unnecessary? Was it because they had just got comfortable? Was it because they are used to sitting there? Was it because their things are parked there?

Or perhaps they didn't mind at all - they were absolutely sure that I must have a good reason for it, and they enjoy a change!

The moral is that you can ask people to change their ways, but you can't make them like it! That is a moral which has been learned many times by people who have tried to impose religious reform on others. We have embarked on a study of life at the time of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, since there is so much in their times which resonates with our own. One of the things which happened in these days, was that the King of Judah, Josiah, imposed a reform.

Read 2 Chronicles 34: 1-7.

Josiah was what the Chronicler calls a good King - because he tried to get the people to worship God in the manner laid down in the Books of Moses. We saw last week that one of the main reasons that the worship of God had become so mixed up with other forms of religion was because the Assyrians insisted that the states which had their protection must also have their religion. Josiah's great-grandfather, Hezekiah, had rebelled against this and retribution had been swift and terrible, so the next two Kings, Manasseh and Amon did all that the Assyrians wanted.

But Josiah wanted to change things. The Chronicler doesn't tell us that Josiah's religious reform sent political messages to his people and to the Assyrians, but of course it must have done. To the people it sent the message to wake up, stand up, take pride in their nation - and the God who had made and called them - and not sit down under foreign powers. To the Assyrians it said that here was a people who were no longer going to sit quietly and obey whatever the Assyrians told them to do.

Josiah began to seek for the God of his ancestors, and he began by getting rid of all foreign worship. I wonder if it was because he was so young that Josiah had the courage to carry out his reform. He was 16 when he began to seek God and 20 when he began his reform. He carried his youthful crusade not only to the many shrines in his own small land, but also into the occupied land of Israel, on his northern border. Maybe he was trying to unite the divided people. Certainly he was serious about what he was doing.

After the passage which we have read the story continues to tell of how Josiah had the Levites press ahead with the work of purifying and restoring the temple, which his grandfather had begun towards the end of his life. And while they were doing this, they found the book of the law of Moses. Things really must have been pretty bad if such an important document as the law could have been lost - remember, at this time this was all they had of written scripture. Josiah had been seeking the God of his fathers with no help as to what he should do, or who really this God was.

Now he discovered that simply clearing away what was foreign was not enough. God had told the nation to live in certain ways - certain even-handed, just ways; and to worship in certain ways which emphasised his goodness and his holiness, and this had simply not been done. Josiah, we are told, ripped his robes in grief and repentance - repenting, not just for himself, but, as their representative, on behalf of his people.

Then Huldah, a prophetess, sent word to the King that while God would still allow his people to go into exile - because they had to learn to serve and put him first - yet it wouldn't happen in his days because he so genuinely sought the Lord. Josiah was encouraged, and this is what happened next...

Read 2 Chronicles 34:29-33

The King made a covenant before the Lord, and then, he made all who were present in Judah and Benjamin pledge themselves to it. He meant well, but it was never going to work. I tried to make you all change seats and you know how you felt about that. You can (try to) make people change their practices, but devotion of the heart must be grown. Forced reforms have never lasted. This one lasted just as long as Josiah was king, and no longer.

There have been others. Constantine the Great decided to adopt Christianity as the religion of the whole Roman Empire, but all that happened was the Christianity developed some very strange habits as people went on believing as they always had done, but used Christian terms for what they were doing.

When we hear of someone making a covenant before the Lord it reminds us inexorably of that troubled time in our own history, the 1600s, when Scotland knew the unrest of the covenanters. The problem then was that two opposing sides tried to impose their own way of worship on the unwilling people. First King Charles I thought that Episcopacy would be a good idea for Scotland, and made it compulsory, and then the Covenanters, in rejecting this, tried to impose Presbyterianism. The bloody battles and skirmishes lasted for decades and did neither side any credit. And in the end, neither won. The Church of Scotland might have remained Presbyterian, but the covenanters were not fighting for the Scotland we have now, where Episcopalian, and Roman Catholic as well as Baptists and non-denominational churches all flourish and usually work well together.

The trouble with such attempts to enforce faith is that while usually the originators start from a position of firm and true faith themselves, and want only that others might know the truth, and experience the joy of God's presence that they know, yet somehow when the element of compulsion comes in, the very freedom and faith and joy that are the reason for the reform go out the window.

This is what happened in Josiah's day, and what has happened so often since.

Religious faith, life-changing faith cannot be forced. But that is not to say that an expectation of conformity is a wholly bad thing. Jesus said that he had come, not to abolish, but to fulfil both the law and the prophets. He had come to fulfil both the transforming heart of the matter - such as the prophets spoke about - and the moral and religious structure which the law was concerned about. Usually we are more inclined to one side or to the other. There those, like myself, who are more inclined to seek the prophetic side - to look for hearts and lives given over to God's transforming love, with the consequences worked out in radical changes in life-style. But equally there are those who find that the structure of the faith - the routine of worship, the

ordering of propriety and administration is what brings them close to God's presence, and helps them feel secure and beloved. Jesus came for all of us, and he calls all of us to shine as light in the world.

When we think about Josiah and his attempt to make the people return to the former ways, what we can learn is that you can (try to) make people change their practices, even go back to what was done before, but devotion of the heart must be grown. The outward forms can have their place in this: they provide a framework that can be helpful in growing and supporting developing faith - just as a trellis does for Sweet-peas. But the outward forms alone cannot make the plant grow. There is more to growing sweet-peas than having a good piece of trellis handy. There is more to living the life of faith than having some sturdy structures in place. The structures are there to support the faith, the faith should never become secondary to the structures, so that keeping things right becomes an end in itself.

We live in a time when we are inclined to look back to the glory days of the church. We look back to the mid-twentieth century and before that to the latter part of the Victorian era. There was no formal coercion of faith in those days, there were no laws about how and when you must worship. However there was a very great weight of expectation which came from society. And people conformed to that expectation in their droves, so that the churches were full and were powerful. Did all who attended then have a sincere, personal, life-directing faith? No. But more people in that society did have such a faith than in our own times. The adherence to the structures of faith gave faith a chance to grow in places where it might not otherwise have done.

Josiah gave the people that framework in which he hoped faith could grow. Jeremiah told the people about trusting in God. We need both the law and the prophets and Jesus came to fulfil both. He came to take both ideas into his own person, so that in following him we find an order and a support that will sustain us as our faith grows and matures and blossoms like Sweet-peas. As we seek to remain faithful to him in our lives of worship, witness and service, so we must remember that while rituals and orderly ways can help strengthen and guide us, only love for Christ can give life to our faith, only love for Christ can make his righteousness ours.