

PARENTAL APPROVAL

Isaiah 42:1-9

Matthew 3:13-17

The child came home from school beaming with pride. In his hand he brandished a class examination paper which had been returned to him with the score marked in red ink on the front. 98%. He rushed up to his mother and presented it to her, then stood back, waiting for the words of approval. His mother glanced at the paper, saw the excellent score, and remarked "Where is the other two percent?" Suddenly all the pride in his achievement faded away. Yet again he hadn't been good enough, he hadn't managed to win parental approval.

Many of us have known that sudden sinking feeling, when a child realises that they have failed to win parental approval - or so it seems to them. In fact the parent may be bursting with pride on the inside, but that is no use to the child, who can't see through to the inside of the parent's emotions.

As parents it is hard to be as encouraging as your children would like, while still encouraging modesty and humility and other such virtues! I doubt if any of us get it entirely right. I guess that the children who are given complete parental approval are the ones who never think about it, and don't value it, while those who are always striving to please or impress their parents are those whose parents find it hardest to give verbal encouragement. I do know that I was well into my twenties before I realised that I shouldn't try so hard to please the family. I should get my sense of achievement from myself or my friends and peers. But when we are children, as parents are told again and again, we look for approval to our parents. And if for one reason or another, our parents are taken from us before we are assured of that we have gained that approval, then you find that people tend to hold up their actions to the un-guessable criterion of "What would my Mum or my Dad think of this? What would they think of me now?"

Jesus, we can assume, did not put too great a value on having Mary and Joseph's approval. The incident which Luke tells us of, when he stayed behind in the temple as a boy or twelve, shows us an adolescent who is more concerned to discover for himself and become who he is than to worry about getting approval from his earthly parents. In fact he is setting aside what his mother values and expects to learn more of what his Father might be looking for in a Son. This is what he continues to do. Later, when he is in the middle of his ministry, his family - mother and brothers - come to try to stop him, probably fearing that he was going to get himself into trouble. But he simply pays no attention. It is approval from his Father which matters most to him, and that is what motivates all he does.

And so when we see him coming to John for baptism, he comes, not because baptism is something that he needs in itself. He does not need to turn away from his wrong and walk again with God. He is already walking with God and always has been. But he comes, as he says to John, because "It is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness." If there is one genuine sign of righteousness which Jesus can fulfil, can enact, then he will do it. And for him, being baptised is a way of identifying himself with us, with people who are weak and sinful and needing to change. He takes on baptism for us as he will take on death for us. It is the beginning of what will end on the cross.

Jesus seeks to win his Father's approval, and he does win it. "This is my Son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased," says God. Isn't that something that we would all like to hear? Wouldn't we all like to know that our Father - and even more

that our heavenly Father, is well pleased with us? If we would, then Jesus shows us the way. He shows us the way of servant-hood, for he knows that if he takes on all righteousness, then he is also taking on the role of God's appointed servant.

When we read about God's servant in the pages of the prophecies of Isaiah, we tend to read it with the assumption that we know who it is talking about. "Oh yes," we say, "Obviously this is talking about Jesus." And obviously it is - at least in one way. But Isaiah didn't know that. He didn't say "One day God's Son will come and he will be like this, showing how God wants, incredibly, to be our servant as well as our Father." No, when Isaiah spoke these words he wasn't necessarily looking forward in time at all. He was speaking a word to his own generation, and to every generation since, right up until the present day, by describing the sort of person who delights God, with whom God is well pleased.

Jesus would know this passage - every Jew did. When he went for baptism intending to fulfil all righteousness, he knew that this was the sort of person God wanted him to be. And if we seek God's parental approval, then we too should look to this passage to see what pleases God, what Jesus took as a plan for his life.

Isaiah is looking to both the big picture and the small details. The big picture says that God's servant will bring justice to the nations. That's a tall order indeed. But he will do it, not by making a lot of empty noise, not by thoughtlessly going around shouting words - however good the words might be. He will do it by treating people with compassion.

There were times when Jesus had to speak harsh words, especially to the leaders of the nation who were leading the people astray. They could not forgive him for that. But this is not how he made his biggest impact. The reason that they came to listen to him in the first place was because of the way that he treated the ordinary folks in distress. It was the way he fed the hungry and healed the sick. It was the way he made no distinction between the troubles of Jairus, the ruler of the synagogue and the sick and outcast widow who waylaid him at the same time. It was the way he allowed those who were sinful to become his friends and those who were infectious to come close enough for him to touch them. It was the way he tenderly forgave sin and would not allow others to condemn the woman caught in adultery.

These were the things which got the attention. These were the things which showed what God means by justice. And these were the difficult things, the tiring things. How much easier to be a John the Baptist, a preacher of justice in the desert. How much easier to call the crowds and lecture them. But God's justice calls for involvement and compassion, and that is tiring, that takes time and emotion and energy. No wonder that Isaiah had to reassure us that the servant, in not breaking the bruised reed or quenching the dimly burning wick, will himself "not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice." I wonder if verse 4 of this chapter was one which Jesus would call to mind at times, as a promise and a reassurance.

But the wonderful thing, Isaiah is saying, is that the person who lives in this way is the one in whom God delights - anyone who lives in this compassionate way. It talks about Jesus, because Jesus did what is detailed here. It talks about other great saints: William Booth, bringing the gospel and more to the poor with the Salvation Army is one. Gladys Aylward who would not abandon any Chinese orphans while she could yet help them is another. It talks about how God wants all his servants to be.

In Matthew's gospel the first words that we hear Jesus speaking are these: "It is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness." Matthew is showing us that this is going to characterise Jesus' life and his ministry: that if there is a right thing to

do, and a right way to do it, then that will be what he does. Years later Jesus' brother James was to comment "anyone who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it commits sin." (James 4:17) Maybe he had learned from watching his big brother that the way to remain always free of sin, always in God's favour is to live the servant life-style; always doing the right thing by others, never putting yourself and your desires first.

This is the end of the Christmas season, the beginning of so-called normal life starting up again. The schools go back, work returns to normality, the decorations are put away and the excitements of the festivities are over for another year. This is the time for resolutions, for straining to glimpse the unknown future, for determining to do our best to make that future a positive one in various ways.

Jesus' resolution was a simple one: to fulfil all righteousness, to live in such a way as earned his Father's approval. We could do a lot worse than to make it ours. If every Christian, everyone who claims to know Christ as Lord took the picture of God's approved servant to heart then we could go forward into this new year with a lot more confidence, personally, nationally and internationally. God's compassionate justice is surely the antidote to faction and rivalry which leads to unrest and violence.

However 2008 has begun for you, personally, it has not been a good start when we look at the international news. Compassion, justice, fairness, the nurture of the weak has been heard to find, especially in Kenya and in Pakistan. As Christians we must pray for our brothers and sisters who are living in these places, praying that God gives them courage and confidence to continue to live with compassion in his name. And we cannot do this unless we ask God also to help us to follow our compassionate Saviour; the one who identified himself with our sin, even though he was righteous; the one who cared for others to the point of exhaustion; the one who put his all into gaining his Father's approval.

If we do this then one day we too will hear the words, "This is my beloved son, my beloved daughter, with whom I am well pleased."