

Sermon. Freshers Magdalen 2017; Matthew 21: 33-46

We have recently had National Poetry day, and I was delighted to hear that T.S. Eliot was voted Britain's favourite poet. Another favourite is Rudyard Kipling, and here's the final stanza of one of the nation's favourite poems:

If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
 Or walk with Kings—nor lose the common touch,
 If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,
 If all men count with you, but none too much;
 If you can fill the unforgiving minute
 With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,
 Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
 And—which is more—you'll be a Man, my son!

Do you recognise it? It is, of course, 'If' by Rudyard Kipling. Written to his son as a piece of advice for life. I wonder why it people's favourite poem? Is it because of the perfection of the poetry, or the guidance it gives as a code for life?

I have always thought that, as a gift from one's father, it is a set of guidelines for life that is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to achieve in practice, because it requires one to be faultless, regardless of the faults and imperfections in the world and other people, and whatever challenges life throws at you. This poem asks for perfection. And then, even if you manage to achieve everything, you attain the reward of being 'a man, my son', or I dare say, 'a women' in the case of a daughter. You earn the reward of being counted as part of the human race, no more nor less. Is this really a reasonable requirement just to be regarded as a decent human being? Is it not more akin to the list of advice that Polonius gives to Laertes as he sets sail, in Hamlet Act one, scene three?

‘And these few precepts in thy memory
Look thou character. Give thy thoughts no tongue,
Nor any unproportioned thought his act.
Be thou familiar but by no means vulgar....
.... Neither a borrower nor a lender be,
For loan oft loses both itself and friend,
And borrowing dulls the edge of husbandry.’ And so on...

In order for all of us to flourish and grow in this College and the wider community there are many aspects of behaviour that we might adopt from these passages of poetry by Kipling and Shakespeare, such as respect, kindness, friendliness, understanding, for instance, but perfection, I propose, is not one of them. We might strive to be the best we can possibly be, and enjoy the challenge, but perfectionism is a different matter and can lead to a counter-productive result. The problem with perfectionism is that, because it is unachievable in all areas of life, it can lead to giving up completely. There are many pressures to be perfect in all areas: socially, domestically, at work or school and, dare I say it, even in our online, social media presence.

In our reading from St. Matthew’s Gospel this morning, Jesus rebukes those who consider themselves to be perfect: the perfect keepers of the law, the Pharisees (the wicked tenants in the parable) and tells them that:

⁴³I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom.

What Jesus highlights is the important difference between those who rigidly keep the letter of the law without those who produce the fruits of the kingdom. That is, those who lead fruitful lives, not just successful ones.

“There is a great difference between successfulness and fruitfulness. Success comes from strength, control, and respectability. A successful person has the energy to create something, to keep control over its development, and to make it available in large quantities. Success brings many rewards and often fame. Fruits, however, come from weakness and vulnerability. And fruits are unique. A child is the fruit conceived in vulnerability, community is the fruit born through shared brokenness, and intimacy is the fruit that grows through touching one another’s wounds. Let’s remind one another that what brings us true joy is not successfulness but fruitfulness.” – **Henri Nouwen**

Henri Nouwen was wonderfully qualified in make this statement, as he was a hugely successful pastor, writer and leader. Everyone one of us here is successful in some way according to Nouwen’s definition, in that I know all of you have achieved great success in different fields and will do more, and so you should, and be rewarded. But Nouwen also knew that what makes our happiness and our joy complete is being fruitful, through being truly human, and acknowledging that we are not perfect but broken and in need of God’s grace. Only when we reach out to God and our neighbours or recognize the vulnerability of our friends, do we become really human and begin to understand the values of God’s kingdom. And Christ encourages us that his kingdom belongs to those who bear fruit. And so in the coming year, in this College community and especially through our communal acts of gathering in this Chapel, let us achieve our goals, reach our targets and be successful, yes. But let us also remember where our true sense of fulfillment lies, in the vulnerability, community and shared experience of our lives together. Let’s

remind one another that what brings us true joy is not successfulness but fruitfulness. Amen.