

Honest to God

Psalm 98, 2 Thessalonians 3:1-5, 13-16, Luke 20:27-38 Rev J Shannon

The Thessalonians were in a right state. Highly agitated. It seems that some were growing weary of what supposed to be the imminent arrival of the Lord. How long? They asked, How long? While others had received news on the grape vine or even possibly a forged letter pretending to be from Paul that the day had already come...and they'd missed it. they were definitely in an agitated state when this letter was delivered.

The readings this week are again how we test and retest God but almost completely ignores testing ourselves. The readings that were set in both Psalm 145 and Haggai were all about 'when the heck will you fulfil your promises!!? – where is the 2nd temple? And the Thessalonians reading is directed to a group of fractious Christians who have grown tired of waiting for the 2nd coming. They are judging God's faithfulness on the arrival – or non-arrival and angry they might have missed out.

As long as we think in terms of who's in and who's out; as long as we base everything on what can you give me – we have set up a paradigm that will always cause conflict. We, not individuals and not the Church, are not the judges here. There is only one judge.

Well, I've had a tough week. I don't feel like judging God or even talking about the trials and tests of humans. I just want to get back to some basics.

Do you trust God?

Even the American dollar bill has "In God we trust" but I somehow doubt that it's true. Do you trust in God?

Then why do we 'hide' stuff. Why isn't God the first port of call?

I know I've been banging on about judging others for a couple of weeks now but aren't we afraid that we'll be judged? So much of scripture (and especially Sunday school teaching was carefully selected to tell us how bad we are; telling children they just weren't good enough. Just this week, a colleague in Ministry proudly announced that on a mission, she got a non-English speaking Kanak village to recite the 'sinners' prayer' with her. Does it count if you don't know what you're saying? So much of Sunday school was be this or be that or you won't get to heaven. Well, last week¹ we

¹ Luke 19:1-10 Zacchaeus – the tax collector

showed it's not the good, the perfect, the blameless that God sees and loves and invites...it's the whole blooming lot! You only have to look to Him.

All you are required to do be *try*. Try your best...and that means you have to be honest: with yourself and with God. After all, he knows it already.

Instead of asking for parking places or a win at the races, I'd like to hear some prayers that start with...

Hello God. It's me. I stuffed up.

Anne Lamott's first book was called *Grace – eventually* and it is a series of stories where mostly she got it wrong and sometimes got it right, often by accident. The point is – we have to listen to ourselves. WE are responsible. She was trying to be a better person. I know it's not easy to maintain a watchful eye that doesn't judge. What we should do is evaluate how we're going on the TRY-scale. Could I have done better?

Honesty is so hard. Every time I watch the TV and hear Americans talking about 'Freedom' it usually means they want the freedom to ban this book, control women's bodies and decide who gets to vote.² Why don't they just be honest?

Monday night's Australian story was about a religious school in Queensland trying to force teachers and parents to sign a declaration against gay and transgender people. They saw that as part of their freedom of religion and claimed it was their Christian right. The parents didn't see it that way. The parents (not the church) believed God loves us as we are and that being Christian was Inclusive, safe and welcoming. In the end, the parents and teachers rose up, the school backed down but the religious authorities of that particular church moaned that the religious freedom bill would have protected them if it had gone through. Protected them from the parents?

The problem with the Bill is that we already have human rights legislation – which recognises the human rights of *everyone*. You can't have it both ways. The proposed religious freedom bill allowed groups to exclude and vilify based on beliefs. Well, there are a lot of people who don't believe Blacks should vote or Jews own property. We already have the freedom to practice our religions. We can already believe what we like and live within the boundaries of our faith. What we don't have is the right to persecute others. Once again 'freedom' was meant to be the opposite. Let's be honest.

² The Puritans/Pilgrims that settled the USA in 1620 left England after an anti-discrimination bill was passed that no longer allowed them to persecute other faiths. No wonder the American idea of 'freedom' is a bit wonky.

The school was angry that the mainstream Christian churches ‘didn’t have the backbone’³ to stand up for them. They didn’t seem to realise that the mainstream churches actually did not support what they were trying to do. Each church may have its views and beliefs around gender relationships but they unanimously **do not** agree to denying humans access to education or being treated as non-humans. The problem is that many of the independent churches claim to speak for all Christians. And that’s not true.

So why can’t they be honest? Most of the talk about ‘freedom’ even during the lock down was really about lawlessness. The same kind Paul was warning about in this epistle.

The ‘freedom’ movement around the world is the war cry of people who think they’ve missed the boat. They’re not sure what boat but it is something like the gravy train or the train to Jordon⁴:

Paul begins to counter the fears by reminding people of the previous teachings. The ones they can rely on – not the charlatans, new age preachers. He warns them against the false prophets who mislead the people with false teachings. Paul makes it clear that not all teachers who propret to be Christian can be trusted.

Paul also warns them that even the apostles said there would be scoffers; people who say it isn’t real, it won’t happen ...or maybe even, it already did and you missed it.

Oddly, there are a few places in the Bible that say you won’t know it’s coming except that it will be preceded by lawlessness. It is commonly believed that this period of trial is designed to divide ‘the believers’ from the non-believers. But again, note Zacchaeus wasn’t a believer – not at first. He was just curious.

Let’s take a helicopter view of how Paul handles this situation. First, he names the anxiety for what it is. Then he recalls the teaching previously offered on the topic. He reminds everyone of God’s love and the promise of salvation. He calls on them to be confident and then he prays for growth...in other words, let this situation be a learning opportunity. Let us be grown and changed by it. We are called by God to be fully human.

³ That’s a direct quote of the leader of a church I’ve never heard of...

⁴ People get ready, there’s a train a coming; Don't need no baggage, you just get on board
All we need is faith to hear the diesel hummin'
You don't need no ticket, you just thank the lord

We can do that.

Last week, we sang, 'what a friend we have in Jesus'. It is a favourite song. What we really need to do is take the words to heart. Don't live in denial thinking God won't know what you've done. Don't beat yourself up endlessly and slip into self-loathing...that is not what the divine does. You are loved and you know it – so you are called to love yourself. it's probably disrespectful to do otherwise.

Just take it to the Lord. Just be honest. Create a Celtic habit of praising the divine from sunrise to sunset. Thank you for the water that comes from my tap. Thank you for the soft bed I'm lying in...Seems that the more we praise God, the less harm we do...and when you have those moments of insight, don't sink into self-rebuke... take them to God.

Hello God, I stuffed up....

This is what I did and this is what I probably should have done. Next time, I willamen.