

Homily for Stephen Ames – 50 years a Priest.

Matthew 20.20-28

Some years ago, when Stephen Ames had been ordained for about 30 years, and I 10, while reading Sandra Schneider's, *The Revelatory Text*¹, it occurred to me that the Scriptures not only reveal something about the nature of God, but also reveal a lot about the authors and all the subsequent readers; including those of us gathered here tonight.

The key to 'seeing' what is being revealed is noticing through careful observation and then asking, why is it so? That question is the lasting gift of Professor Julius Sumner Miller, whose TV program I watched religiously as a young person². Why is it so? Why did the writer put it that way? Why does that story occur just there in this or that book? What is being said about the reader that the passage is read in that way? What am I learning about me?

Let me take as an illustration the gospel text for tonight, the gospel reading chosen by the Church for the Feast of St James, the Feast on which Stephen was ordained.

A careful look at this text reveals something about the author of Matthew and gives us some insight into what was afoot in the community for whom the author was writing. The choosing of this reading also reveals something about the Church. Stephen asked me to speak about the role of the church in the 21st Century. As we explore that question, we need to know what is being revealed about the path that got us to where we are.

In the Matthean version of the story, the request that the positions of privilege at Jesus' right and left hand be given to James and John is made by their mother. The interesting thing, the thing worth noticing that helps us see what is being revealed, comes into view when we note the differences between this version of the story and the version recorded in Mark³. In the Marcan version the request for the seats at the right and left hand of Jesus is made by the two brothers. Not their mum.

¹ Sandra M Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture*, Michael Glazier, 1999

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Julius_Sumner_Miller

³ Mark 10.35-44

Now the thing about the relationship between Mark and Matthew is that large slabs of the text of Matthew were produced by the author simply copying, more or less, word for word the pericopes as recorded in Mark. This means that it is always interesting and revelatory to note and then examine any differences between the two texts. The story that is presented to us tonight is one of the stories that Matthew has lifted from Mark.

So, it is worth asking what is being revealed about the author of Matthew, the author's community, and their understanding of the role of the apostles that lead the writer of Matthew to change the text from that which was being copied. It is a significant change. It is quite a clumsy change. Why has the author shifted the blame for the out-of-order request to the mum, a character not mentioned at all in the Marcan original?

Could it be that by the time Matthew was being written, the Church was trying to tidy up the portrayal of the Apostles; moving them from being flawed human beings, bumbling and uncomprehending as portrayed by Mark⁴, into unblemished heroes, heroes the church no longer wished to see as self-centred and greedy.

I suspect also that the difference between the two texts reveals something about the way the church was crafting its own image as it moved towards the end of the first century.

So, it seems to me that this is a revelatory text, revealing something about the church back then. Could it also be revealing something about the church now as well?

Looking to ourselves, it is interesting to ask Sumner Miller's question, why is it so? as we reflect on why the church when it developed and revised the lectionary chose and continues to choose the Matthean version of this story rather than the older Marcan one. After all, the Feast day asks us to focus on James, yet the story we use focusses more on the boys' mum than it does them. Could our use of this version of the story be a reminder that we have always struggled to see ourselves as a school for sinners rather than a society of saints. It could also be that the choice is an expression of the church's long held practice of blaming the woman, from Eve onwards, for any stuff-ups.

⁴ John Carroll, *The Existential Jesus*, Counterpoint, 2009

If we cast our net a little wider, there is something revelatory in the fact that when the gospel parables in which a king appears are read, the general assumption is that the king stands as an image of God, no matter how outrageous the behaviour of the monarch. Think of the monarch in the story of the wedding banquet⁵.

Would you want your wedding organised in this way?

Stood up by all the invited guests, a sure sign that this king is despised, the king kills all the invitees and then 'invites' – an invitation that one would be brave to reject – anyone and everyone. The king then persecutes one of the 'invited' guests for not having the correct frock.

Do we really want God to be like that?

Or is the fact that so many automatically read such texts in a way that sees these monarchs as God revealing the heart of a church that longs to be aligned with Empire; a church prepared to be aligned with power, no matter how unjust the wielding of that power might be?

And so, to the church in the twenty-first century.

I can see multiple futures for the church or at least for followers of The Way. Our futures can be mapped a little by what is being revealed by the texts to which we are attaching ourselves in these days. We always chose the scriptures that reveal our heart. There is little objectivity in these choices, they reveal our subjectivity.

Here and in places like the USA, large numbers of Christians will cling to the desire for power. At its extreme, this manifestation of the faith will see Christendom morphing into something unbelievably toxic. Franklin Graham and all those who aligned themselves with the most recent former president of that Nation, are early expressions of this. It is more than revelatory that these quoted scriptures that likened Trump to Cryrus⁶. In the future I can see them continuing to pursue power by aligning themselves with conspiracy theories and racist and misogynistic forces. American exceptionalism gone mad. It has its Australian expression as well.

⁵ Matthew 22.1-14

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/jan/11/donald-trump-evangelical-christians-cyrus-king>

A less extreme form will be the one that reacts to the decline in Christendom by seeking to build a structure that is against what its adherents describe as 'the world'. This form will seek to exercise power, at least, over its adherents, pushing back against 'worldly' things like the equality of women, gender fluidity and sexual diversity. It will seek to exclude all forms of difference and diversity. It is and will seek to purify the church, by clinging in fear to a few marginal texts. These are revelatory texts indeed.

Finally, I can see a manifestation that will embrace being in a place of increasing marginality. From that marginal place, this manifestation will find the capacity to read the stories that contain kings differently. These will come to see that the Christ-like figure in such parables is not be the despotic king, but the defiant guest, the one who stood up to power, the one whom the powerful throw into the outer darkness, into Gehenna.

These will come to see that the faith is not about a sovereign God, with whom we seek to align in our pursuit of power, but that the faith is about following the crucified and risen one; following The Way; standing in solidarity with the cast-out ones.

Whether the church ends up being a blessing or a curse, or a mixture of both, will depend on which of the Scriptures it attaches itself; scriptures that will reveal the heart of the church. Will it be Luke 4 or an obscurantist reading of Romans 1.18-32? Galatians 3.28 or 1 Timothy 2.12?

+Amen
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