

**The 28<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, 25<sup>th</sup> September 2011 – We are as we do**  
**Readings: Matthew 21: 23-32, Philipians 2: 1-13**

Are there any other Battlestar Galactica fans here this morning? For those not familiar with BSG the show follows the survivors of the twelve human colonies who are trying to find Earth after the homeworlds were destroyed by the Cylons, who were originally robots created to help the humans and inevitably turned on their creators and are now trying to annihilate them. You get the storyline I'm sure. Where the real brilliance of BSG shines through though is in interaction between the humans and the Cylons, who look just like humans, and the constant question that sits just below the surface – what are the real differences between them? It's a question addressed in the very first series, leading to the observation by one of the Cylons, Number 6, that, "in the scheme of things, we are as we do."

We are as we do. It's a sentiment echoed somewhat in at least two of our readings this morning. In Matthew the Pharisees come to Jesus and ask, "by whose authority do you teach?" and Jesus characteristically comes back at them with another question and then he tells a story, but the point behind the point is that they're asking the wrong question. It's not about authority, it's about actions.

In Philipians Paul offers us one of the most lovely and significant pieces of Christology in the scriptures. The so-called Christ hymn, or Kenosis hymn, lays out this wonderful description of who Christ was and what he did, and we miss much of the beauty because we're reading a bald English translation, and so I could talk to you about what kenosis means, and how the emptying that's referred to here is a specific kind of phrase that means to melt and is reserved for poetic use in similar way to 'she melted into his strong arms', and how the Greek term translated here as 'exploited' is a very rare word that refers specifically to sexual abduction as often perpetrated against human beings by gods in Greek mythology, and I could talk about the use of first order imperatives and their significance in this case, and it would all be very, very interesting, but almost totally beside the point.

I say 'almost' by the way because there are huge issues with the way this passage is often read and heard and understood. In just the past few days I have read commentaries that baldly state that this passage means we have to completely empty ourselves, to put ourselves behind everyone else, to not stand up for our rights – this passage has been used to justify sexual abuse victims being told to forgive their abusers and not report them, and that's just wrong in so many ways, not least of which is because it fails to recognise the literary context of the passage as poetry or hymnody, rather than straight out instruction. Again though, this is somewhat beside the point.

Paul's main concern in writing to the Philipians, as it is in many of his writings, is to offer them advice on what it means to live a Christian life. We find this often. Whole chapters of exhortations and explanations, and all the usual Pauline complexity and imagery, but behind all that and even to some extent in front of all that, in Philipians Paul says it straight – if you want to be a Christian, be like Christ.

Imitatio Christi. I used to own a 19<sup>th</sup> century Latin version of the classic book on Christian living by Thomas a Kempis, the imitation of Christ. For centuries Christians were taught

that the key to the Christian life was to imitate Jesus, to do as Jesus did in the way that Jesus did it. In more recent years this focus on imitation has shifted more to education. Today we learn about Jesus, we study the scriptures, and that's a good thing, an important thing, but it's not the same thing.

Paul knew this instinctively, as did Jesus. Both men were born and raised in the rabbinic movement. For them faith was not something learned as much as it was lived. The student of a rabbi learnt for so much by studying the theory, but more by copying the rabbi. The study was important too, no question about that, by the age of twelve Jewish boys who aspired to be rabbinical students in first century Palestine Israel could recite the first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch, off by heart, but the true student was not so much educated as they were formed, and a large part of that formation came about by doing as the rabbi did.

We have, to a large extent, lost that concept of formation. For us, I think, faith is often an intellectual thing – a set of beliefs, of learnings, something we're taught – and what Paul calls the Philippians to in this reading – and what we might perhaps be called back to – is something far more holistic.

“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus”. Imitate Jesus, do what Jesus did. This is more than just an intellectual challenge. It calls for actions more than attitudes, and doing more than thinking. Do what the one who did not see his power as a thing to be wielded against others did. Do what the one who poured himself out in love for humanity, who gave himself totally to us, who became as one with us did. Do what the one who loved so much he was willing to die, even in the most gruesome way possible, did. And do what the one whom God exalts, to whom all knees bow, and for whom all praise is given did. Do what Christ did, and in the doing, become like Christ.

That's really the point here, in both the gospel and the epistle. Intellectual questions have their place and spiritual exercises can be useful, but if we want to become like Jesus we need to do what Jesus did.

The first son refused his father, he had no great desire to work in the vineyard, but he went and did it anyway. The second son wanted to keep his father happy, he agreed to go out and work, but he didn't want to either and so, once dad had gone, he didn't. Which son learned how to grow grapes? Which son became like his father? The one who said all the right things but didn't do any of the work? Or the one who grumbled about it at first, but still went and worked and experienced what it meant to be a vintner?

Herein lies the not-so-secret secret of the Christian life; all of us have to fake it til we make it. No one starts out from day one looking, thinking, feeling and acting like Jesus, not a one. But if we follow our rabbi, if we listen to his words, and most importantly, if we imitate his actions, ultimately we will become as he is, because when it comes down to it, in the scheme of things, it's not so much that we are what we do, it's more that we become what we do, especially when we remember, as Paul points out, that it is God who is at work in us.