

Sunday November 6th 2016.

Preacher: Leslie Griffiths

Readings: Psalm 145: 1-13
Matthew 23: 1-12

Hymns: 401; 507; 591; 487

IT'S NOT OK!

“Angry hands break eggs.” That’s what the man said on the early morning farming programme. There was I still supine, thinking about getting up, my mind in overdrive wondering how to begin this sermon with the picture of someone’s hands at work when, as a pure act of grace, this little phrase gave me my opening words. “Angry hands break eggs.” They were spoken by a Derbyshire farmer. He and his wife look after young people coming out of care, kids who often have behavioural or personality difficulties. They seem to like working on the farm and especially in the chicken sheds. Their progress towards a more useful life can, it seems, be measured by the number of eggs they break. At the outset, when there’s still anger coursing through them, the number of breakages is high. But it diminishes with the passing of time. And that’s how I learned how it’s not only the making of omelettes that requires the breaking of eggs. The same action can lead to the remaking of a life. Perhaps it ought to be called Ovate Therapy.

The hands I actually had in mind before that word on the radio, however, were those of one of the finest men I’ve ever met. His name was Harold Oatley and he was one of the country’s leading orthopaedic surgeons. I met one after another of his patients who told me how, allied to his brilliant clinical skills, he had a capacity to talk to ordinary people that was very rare. He’d give them all the time they needed to understand what they’d have to go through. He inspired their confidence without ever patronising them. And it’s *his* hands I was thinking about as I lay abed in vacant and in pensive mood. For those hands had set a thousand bones and, unlike all the king’s horses and all the king’s men, had succeeded in putting quite a few Humpty Dumpties back together again. Yes Harold Oatley’s wonderful hands. But not as they were in the operating theatre. Not in his medical work. The picture that filled my mind shows them wrapped around the handle of a broom. Harold and his wife Winifred had, for many years, served the needs of children of mixed parentage, the offspring of sailors visiting the Port of

London whose one-night stand left many a local lass pregnant. The fathers, of course, were never seen again.

The Oatleys had looked after these kids, and *their own* kids, since the 1940s. The group had grown to over 60. They enjoyed wonderful parties. It was at the end of one such event, when the food and the fun, the singing and the dancing, were over and the clearing up was well under way that I saw those hands at work. When everyone had gone home, it was Harold who put the lights out, he was the last to leave, after he'd tied up the black bags, mopped and brushed the floor and put the furniture back. This Methodist Local Preacher was a servant of the servants of God. No menial task was beneath him. His humility was breathtaking yet, unlike the odious 'umbleness of Uriah Heap, it was worn with the lightness of a summer breeze.

A nice tale but so what? Well, to stand as an exposition of this morning's gospel, that's what! Sometimes it's appropriate to turn to the work of scholars who can help explain some of the difficult words or concepts at the heart of a biblical passage. At other times, however, it is life that acts as the best commentary on scripture. This teaching of Jesus was fully lived out in the person of Harold Oatley. An overtly public display of piety was never his thing. Nor the seat of honour at great events. He certainly didn't expect people to touch their forelocks, bow or curtsy, address him as "professor" or "doctor." He was a teacher to his fingertips (those hands again!) but taught by standing alongside people; he never disempowered them by making them feel the weight of his learning. Rank mattered nothing to him. He was a father, a neighbour, a fellow worshipper, a member of the community, a friend and many amongst those he mixed with had no idea about the esteem in which he was regarded in the medical world. He had discovered one of the most important lessons in life. True greatness has little to do with diplomas or certificates, position or titles, earnings or power. It has everything to do with an integrity of being, a wholeness, that holds someone together in one piece. Whoever seeks to be exalted will be brought back down to earth again. The Icarus story carries its own truth and has been repeated again and again. But whoever, by contrast, humbles himself will be exalted – not with worldly honours or gongs or promotions but in terms of that natural authority that always emanates from someone in touch with his or her deepest self, imbued with a profound inner peace, at one with him or her self and those around them.

Now Harold Oatley embodied all that. He was a walking commentary on the teaching of Jesus, a sermon on two legs. He was a Great Man. And he was definitely “not OK!” Once upon a time things were considered U or non-U, kosher or not kosher, cool or not cool. I now want to invent my own replacement for all of these categories of whether something is acceptable or not. Things are “OK!” or “not OK!” And I’m alluding, of course, to the magazine that bears that title. So much of what’s carried in it speaks of self-promotion; it shows such reverence for celebrity or fame or glamour; it feeds the notion that the meaningful life has to do with style and fashion, it seems (at least to this untutored eye) to be so self-serving. “OK!”, therefore, refers to those activities we all indulge in that are calculated to exalt ourselves. “Not-OK!”, on the other hand, serves to describe the person who’s unlikely to get a photograph into the magazine but might, for all that, have grasped something important about what human life is all about.

In the week of All Saints’ Day, we do well to remember that the marks of sainthood are far more democratic than we’ve come to understand. To my mind it has little to do with a complicated process that, with the final approval of a committee sitting in the Vatican, exalts someone in heaven in a way the scripture condemns on earth. Nor is a saint someone who’s impossible to live with, someone better-than-good, oleagiously smoother and nicer than the rest of us. [Incidentally, I love Oscar Wilde’s word on this: “the difference between a sinner and a saint,” he wrote, is that a saint has only a past; a sinner has a future.”] No, saints are rather those ordinary people who’ve discovered the secret of true greatness. I meet them every day. I’m looking at some of them right now.

So then, what’s the secret in all this? What gives these workaday saints, these common-or-garden special people, their insight into the meaning of life, their understanding of just how things are meant to be? I believe the answer’s to be found in the world’s greatest “not-OK!” person of them all. Jesus of Nazareth. He utters these words about the way true greatness is the product of humility and, of course, those of us who read them with the advantage of hindsight know how perfectly he lived them out himself. It was left to St. Paul to sum up the character and achievement of Jesus. “He shared the nature of God did not snatch at equality with God;” he wrote, “rather, he made himself nothing, accepted the form of a slave. Bearing the human likeness, sharing the human lot, he humbled himself, and was obedient, even to the point of death, death on a cross! *Therefore*, [what a wonderful word that “therefore” is] God raised him to the heights and bestowed on him the

name above all names, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow – in heaven, on earth, and in the depths - and every tongue acclaim ‘Jesus is Lord,’ to the glory of God the Father.” So Jesus, as usual, embodied the very truths he asks others to embrace. There is no difference, not one iota, between his advice and his practice, his words and his deeds, his teaching and his example. You couldn’t put a cigarette paper between what he says and what he does. It’s brilliant. He’s the model for all of us.

One of my favourite television programmes, off air now for quite a few years, was *Silent Witness* with Amanda Burton quite magnificent in her role as the pathologist whose forensic skills help the police solve many a murder. One episode stands out in my memory. The doctor herself was ill, this expert in death wondered whether she wasn’t herself dying. She was called in to help a religious community with their desire to prove that a pious sister who’d been dead for forty years was, in fact, a saint. There were many people who’d have benefited if it could be proved that the body of the holy nun had proved immune to some of the normal biological processes after her death. It would take the word of this world-renowned pathologist to prove it. She had no faith, no religion at all. Such faith as she had, she put in science. The programme explored the relative (and often over-lapping) values of these faith systems, religion and science, with a rare brilliance. The pathologist had to disappoint the religious community; there were perfectly rational explanations for the dead nun’s condition. So there was no basis upon which she could be proved to be a saint. The disappointment on the face of the Mother Superior said it all. She had so wanted, so prayed for, something out of the ordinary, a miracle. It would have enhanced the reputation of her community. But the last word was left with the pathologist. “Don’t be disappointed,” she said, “you don’t need a miracle here; the way you care for people, that’s a miracle and everyone can see it any time they come here.”

We began and ended with the story of medical people. The fictional one told last night’s audience what constitutes a true miracle. The flesh-and-blood one lived his miracle every day of his life. And the true inspiration for all such victorious living is to be found in Jesus whose voice speaks across the ages and the continents and who invites us today to follow him, to follow his teaching. The two are one.

God help us. Today and always. Amen.

