

Proper 21A (Pentecost 17)

Sunday Said Mass at the High Altar

by the Reverend James Ross Smith

Philippians 2:1–13; Psalm 25:3–9; Matthew 21:23–32

On Thursday, I decided to ride my bike down to Chelsea to run some errands. As I left the apartment, I was reminded to be careful and not to come back all bent out of shape because I'd encountered taxi drivers parking in the bike lane or pedestrians crossing the street against the light. I promised I would do my best.

I made it all the way to Fifth Avenue and 40th Street. I saw a young man with a bushy red beard walking toward me on the sidewalk. I noticed that he wasn't wearing a mask, but that seemed unremarkable to me, and, anyway, it was none of my business. Then this young man did something that startled me. He spit. He just spit right there on the sidewalk, something that is, I think, not exactly approved by the Health Department these days. And that did seem remarkable to me. I confess that I had the impulse to shout, "Are you an *idiot?*" But I didn't. I'd been told, "Don't come back all twisted," after all. So, I kept going, but I couldn't help thinking, "Why would anyone *do* that?"

And as I thought about it later, it struck me that moments like that are really tricky. You believe that

you're right, but such self-assurance can turn all too quickly into self-righteousness. You genuinely believe that someone is acting like an idiot, so you start judging, condemning, and even yelling, but suddenly there you are, acting like an idiot too. And when that happens doors slam and mutual comprehension becomes impossible. Only raw feeling remains. The desire for justice turns into the desire to be right at all costs, and then God's grace is ignored. Mercy, compassion, remorse, repentance, and reconciliation seem impossible and only anger and the need to be right remain. Is it any wonder that Jesus takes name-calling so seriously. Jesus says, "You have heard that it was said to the men of old, 'You shall not kill; and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother shall be liable to the council, and whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be liable to the hell of fire" (Matthew 5:21–23). Which sounds pretty serious, so I'm glad that I didn't call the guy an idiot.

It's interesting, Jesus makes a connection between contempt and *killing*. They're not the same thing, of course. Jesus doesn't say that they are, but, for him, they are related, maybe because, if we really *dismiss* somebody, we can fool ourselves into believing that

that somebody doesn't matter and, for Jesus, that's a problem.

This evening, at sundown, Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, begins for our Jewish brothers and sisters. Tomorrow, during the afternoon service on that most solemn of days, the Book of Jonah, will be chanted in the synagogue. You'll perhaps remember what happens in that book. Jonah preaches repentance to the Gentile Ninevites, and lo and behold they do just that. They *repent*, but Jonah takes no joy in this. He *wants* God to do what Jonah has promised and foretold. He wants God to *overthrow* Nineveh, and when God refuses to do that, Jonah grows sullen and bitter. He sulks beneath a tree and when God makes the tree wither, Jonah feels no remorse. He is blind to God's will, God's authority, and God's compassion. He does not change his mind. He would rather die than do that, he says. And God responds: "And the Lord said, 'Jonah, you pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night, and perished in a night. And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left. . .'" (4:9–11).

You can see why Jews read Jonah on the holiest day in their calendar: because it reveals the heart of God. God

looks on the Ninevites with love and compassion, not because they are perfect, not because they are fulfilling the Law—they don't even know about the Law—but because they are lost, because they “do not know their right hand from their left,” and because, despite their ignorance and confusion, they have turned around. They have repented. They sense that their lives could be lived differently. And God looks upon this gathering of messy humanity—all those Ninevites and Jonah, too—and He does not look away.

Which brings us to today's gospel. Context is important here: Palm Sunday has taken place. Jesus has entered the Holy City and he has gone to the Temple, the Holy City's holiest place, and he acts with *authority*. He “drives out all who were buying and selling in the Temple.” He welcomes the blind and the lame—normally excluded from the Temple—and he heals them. In this place of strict hierarchy—priests, men, women, Gentiles—suddenly the joyful voices of children are heard. Jesus acts with grace-filled authority, which inevitably leads to a discussion with the priests and the elders about the *nature* of his authority. Which isn't really correct. Jesus refuses to engage in an argument with the leaders of the people about authority, position, or power. He doesn't defend himself. Rather, he leads them, by way of a discussion about John the Baptist, into a dialogue about

repentance, which seems like a detour, but which is really Jesus' way of insisting that what is really at issue here is God's authority, God's will, and God's compassion. And so he tells this parable about two sons, the first says no to his father, but then feels remorse, turns around, and does what his father has asked him to do, and the second son, who says yes to his father, but then disobeys him. The leaders of the people cannot help but admit that it is the first son who has done his father's will. Which allows Jesus to drive home the same point that the Book of Jonah does, a point also made in First Samuel, where we read: "The Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart" (16:7). God looks graciously upon the Ninevites, and upon the tax collectors and the prostitutes. He sees their remorse and their willingness to change, and he rejoices.

We live in a time when there is a whole lot of tribalism, name-calling, and self-righteousness at loose in the land. People feel passionately and that's not likely to go away anytime soon. But underneath all those passions there is also, in this plague time, much fear and great anxiety. In this strange time, are we not all just a little bit like those Ninevites, not knowing our right hand from our left?

For Jews, Yom Kippur is a solemn day, but also a joyful one. For us, Good Friday is the same: God does what we cannot do for ourselves. He refuses to let sin and death have the last word. Jesus dies and rises and shows us the power of resurrection for this world and for the next. Jesus, who is Mercy and Compassion, calls us to be his disciples and invites us to go forth not to tear the world asunder, but to repair it.