

Sermon on 11th Sunday in Ordinary Time (17th June, 2018) Jim Lam

1 Samuel 15:34-16:13

2 Corinthians 5:6-10, 14-17

Mark 4:26-34

What is your favourite colour? One of my favourites is green, because it is the colour of new shoots in spring, which bring an anticipation of growth, hope and life after the bleak wintertime. Have you noticed that the colour around the church and on clergy's liturgical vestments have changed to green after Trinity Sunday? Green symbolises hope and vitality and reminds us of God's life-giving and life-changing power. With this in mind, let us ponder how our Lord Jesus' resurrected life changes our lives.

What is so special about the lives of people who call themselves Christians? If we are asked to describe what a "typical" Christians is like, it is easy to fall into the trap of trying to plunge directly into stereotypes, like, Christians are good people; Christians have high moral standards and ethical behaviour; Christians are people of strict principles, and so on and so forth. Come to think of it, our expectation of someone is quite often based on that person's status and role.

There's a story which you may have heard before. A Roman Catholic priest, a protestant minister, and a Jewish rabbi want to see who's best at his job. So each one goes into the woods, finds a bear, and attempts to convert it. Later, they all get together. The priest begins: "When I found the bear, I read to him from the catechism and sprinkled him with holy water. Next week is his first Communion." Then the minister says, "I found a bear by the stream, and preached God's holy Word. The bear was so mesmerized that he let me baptize him." They both look down at the rabbi, who is lying on a gurney in a body cast. "Looking back," he says, "maybe I shouldn't have started with the circumcision."

And so, a priest must act like a priest, a minister must act like a minister, and a rabbi must act like a rabbi. Because, this is what someone with their status and role is expected to do.

But is it really status and role that dictates how a person acts?

Mark Twain's *The Prince and the Pauper* was adapted into a radio drama when I was a child. I spent many a happy hour listening to the strange adventures of a pauper boy and a crown prince who became friends and decided to switch places for a while so that they could experience each other's lives. Although the two boys looked so alike that no one could tell them apart except by what they wore, both boys found that a change in clothing did not mean that they could adjust automatically and smoothly to their altered status and circumstances. The vast difference in their family background, upbringing and education meant that their characters and personalities were poles apart and the ways they dealt with things were totally dissimilar.

From this, we can see that rather than outward status, the way a person acts is related to the person's inner qualities. Similarly, when we look at the special qualities in the life of Christians, we must note that the change does not happen spontaneously at baptism or conversion, but must start from the fundamental: Only when Christ's resurrected life enters our lives and trigger a change from the very core of our beings, can our lives be changed to be worthy of the name of Christians. Being followers of Christ does not merely mean the observation of a whole range of do's and don'ts. Only after the entering of Christ's resurrected life into our lives can we lead a life worthy of the calling to which we have been called.

But how does this inner change relate to our outward behaviour? The way Jesus denounces the Pharisees of his day may give us a hint. He calls them hypocrites, because they wear pious appearances but do not live pious lives; they adhere strictly to the Mosaic Law but do not fear God.

In contrary to the Pharisees' way, Jesus demands his followers to return to the very core of the law, that is, to love God and to love each other as themselves. This love is something that springs from the innermost heart of hearts, rather than just outward behaviour.

In fact, Jesus has taken the law and pushed it one step further. For example, the law prohibited murder, but in Jesus' teaching, even getting angry with others is frowned upon. But can anyone really and truly say that they have never ever gotten angry with others? Another example is helping the underprivileged. Surely, we have been taught to care for the least of those who are members of the Lord's family and that it is more blessed to give than to receive; yet when we see more and more cases of people taking advantage of others' kindness, it is hard not to become more reluctant to be charitable. There are many things in real life that let us down, leaving us depressed and discouraged. We might have even wondered about the achievability of Jesus' teachings in a practical sense given the high benchmark set. Still, our faith does give us something better and more beautiful to aspire to.

Yet we can be of good courage because those who are baptised into Christ are promised the new life of the Holy Spirit. And this newness of life is something we have neither achieved nor earned; it is entirely the gift of God. As the Apostle Paul says, "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new". We may note that this statement carries an eschatological sense.

The change Paul emphasizes in these words is incomplete but prophetic. It means that although this new life in us has not reached its fullness in the here and now, the promise of a new creation has already begun!

The parable of the mustard seed may shed some light on this. The mustard seed is the smallest of seed. You have to hold it carefully. Once dropped, it would be quite difficult to retrieve. Yet when it is grown, it becomes the greatest of all shrubs. Jesus compared the mustard seed to the kingdom of God, so that when the stark difference between our faith and the dark reality in life drags us down, so much that we begin to nurture doubts, or question the achievability of our Lord's teachings, we may know that things will be different. It is inevitable that there are not a few temptations that we still must face, but if we are willing to entrust our lives to the Holy Spirit and submit to his guidance, the kingdom of God will be fully realised among us. And in God's fullness, we will become part of the new creation. Everything old will pass away. Everything will become new.

Furthermore, let us not be blinded by our own frailty and failings, but perceive in faith God's work among us, "for we walk by faith, not by sight". Jesus has taught his followers to become like children, because only in childlike simple and pure faith can we focus not on our own weaknesses, but rather on God's actions. That way, we shall be able to learn and grow incessantly in his truth.

On this "green" Sunday, may the power of God's grace enter our lives like a seed, so that we can experience the sprouting in our hearts of his life-giving and life-changing vitality that keeps us growing towards maturity in Christ and of Christ. And in God's grace, may we persist in our faith, so that despite our current imperfection and incompleteness, we can still put our trust in God as we work towards his fullness.

Amen.