

What would you say to Jesus?

Sermon given at the Chaplaincy (Warwick University) – 18th November 2012, 10.30am

I wonder what we would say to Jesus if he were standing right next to us. Would we show him the beautiful churches that we have built? Would we tell him about all the mission work that we do? All the social action that we've been engaged in? About our blogs, our degrees, about all that we did?

Or about what others did – others before us, whom we identify with. The Christian Union leaders, the church leaders, the missionary workers, the football teams, the celebrities, our elected representatives. The Olympics. Would we take Jesus down by the student cinema? By our wonderful tea-making facilities? Would we say "Hey Jesus, look, there's 10 people who came to know you through our work this week"?

I think that sometimes prayers of thanksgiving are a way of saying "Hey Jesus, we are working for you here." I do it myself. I sometimes go and do Hot Choc - that is, I stand outside the Union on a Friday night with a yellow hoodie handing out hot chocolate and biscuits to party-goers - and I think "yes, I am doing God's work because I know he wants me to." And when I do, I usually pray "Thank you for driving us to share your word", or something to that effect. I think we all do something like this, because there is a way in which we want God to be impressed and well-pleased with us – and we want to reach that on our own terms, choosing, in a way, what God should be well-pleased with. Because, somehow, that feels safe and secure: all these things we think we have some form of control over – where in fact, all we have to show for it is but vanity.

That's what the disciple is doing in the Gospel passage. He says to Jesus: "Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!" He is showing off what his people have built for God's glory. And I can't help wondering – what was he expecting? Was he expecting wows and aahs, shouts of wonder by Jesus? Was he expecting a pat on the back? Or, given the context in which this happens, given the questions that other disciples ask right before the passage that we've heard, was he expecting that the beauty and the holiness of the temple would grant him salvation, along with all the Jews who worshipped there?

Equally, don't we have a tendency to do that? To boast about our works – about the things that we have done, about things that our friends have done that impress us? Don't we have a tendency to think "If I go to Hot Choc" or "If I go to small group" or Bible study, then that will grant me salvation; or, if we are a tiny bit more complex in our thinking, that that will be a proof that I have salvation? More crucially, don't we have a tendency to think that "if I don't stop doing this or that", "if I don't go to Soul Space", "if I don't stop sinning", etc., then we are bad Christians, bringing shame to the name of Jesus?

No. Our sacrifices do not justify us. Our works do not justify us. What we did in the past does not justify us – but, crucially, nor does it condemn us. The sacrifice that Jesus gave on the Cross is once, it is also for all – regardless of our temples, or of our achievements. It is what allows us to draw near the throne. In the same way that Jesus allows us to call God "Abba", "Father", he stands as intercessor and in him, the Father sees us as sons, with whom he is well pleased.

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Seeking to please God in that way, thinking we can please God through our own actions and somehow reach, in our own strength, a stage where God is well-pleased with us - that becomes a negation of Jesus's work – a negation of that powerful statement that the Father gives at the start of the Gospel about us, through Jesus's intercession: "This is my Son, with whom I am well pleased."

So. What would we say to Jesus about ourselves if he were standing here with us, if there's nothing that we can produce that can compare with Jesus's work of redemption and intercession?

Look at Zacchaeus. A tax collector, off to see Jesus and then welcomes him in his house. He doesn't tell Jesus he has earned his salvation. He doesn't show off his house, the works of art that are likely to be in it. No, he lets the transformative power of Jesus-show in his statement that, from this day forward, he will make restitution for his sins. He will give half of his goods to the poor.

That's how the "Therefore" in verse 19 of the Hebrews passage works. Because of the sacrifice made once and for all, we can draw near the throne – not on the back of what we have done in the past, not trying to show ourselves up for what we're doing or what we have done; but with a sincere heart.

With those worries gone, and in acceptance of the transformative power of Jesus, we can hold unswervingly to the hope we were promised, and support each other in that hope. This hope becomes our foundation, our rock; and the basis from which we are changed.

See, just because we are saved and secure in that salvation; just because we know we can draw near the throne of God, it does not mean we are to just go there and do nothing; or that we should avoid good works from a misplaced fear that we would start to rely on our works. No, to do so would be to deny the transformation that drawing near the throne brings.

We would still be drawing near the throne, in Jesus, but how, and for what reason? What would be the point of drawing near and not listening? No, we need to listen, and to consider how the work of Jesus transforms us. We need to reflect upon how our lives have been transformed. We need to feel like we belong to that great family in Christ. We need to, finally, look to Jesus and see in him a perfect reflection of us, which keeps on spurring us on to good.

What would we say to Jesus if he were right here? Well, he is here, and his transformative work in us is what can spur us on to do all these things – relying on him and on him alone. Like Zacchaeus, we can tell him all that we will do, turning to the future rather than to the past. And in doing so, we need to remember that he has allowed not only us, but also anyone who believes in him, to draw near the throne of God.

In remembering that, we are all together before God the Father, in the person of Christ. Let us reflect-that unity in keeping on meeting together, and in seeing Jesus in every one of us – thus being spurred to love one another.