

## Sermon for March 14<sup>th</sup>

Sometimes asking someone for help can backfire. In 1978, a Mr Hugh Pike agreed to help a British family whose British-made car had broken down in Bordeaux, and couldn't be mended before a new part arrived. They needed to get back to the UK that day and were booked on to the ferry from Boulogne. But they spoke no French. Mr Pike, who had a working knowledge of French valiantly drove them all the way to the Gare du Nord in Paris, and with just seconds to spare, got them on the train to the port of Boulogne. It was only as the train was pulling out of the station that Mr Pike saw that the train was headed not for Boulogne, but for the Italian city of Bologna. That family would certainly soon be wishing they'd never asked this man for help.

It has been noted that one of the positives of the pandemic has been that there has been an acceptance that an awful lot of people could do with a bit of support one way or another, and people have been more open to helping and to being helped and generally staying in touch.

But why is it so often hard for people to ask for help ? And in keeping with this, I've asked several people for their thoughts on this dilemma this week, and these 4 are the recurring themes:

1. I don't want to trouble anyone. They are busy people and they have other people to worry about.
2. Maybe that person will think I'm incompetent. Most people want others to think they are reasonably competent. Asking for help might jeopardise that. It's worth noting that the Son of God himself was not above asking for help: when meeting a woman who was a social outcast by a well, the first thing he did was ask her for a drink. In the garden of Gethsemane, he asked his 3 disciples to stay close to him, to watch and pray. He was asking for their support at that moment.
3. Then of course, sometimes people have had bad experiences: they've looked for help and it hasn't been there. They've looked to the wrong people, at the wrong time or asked in the wrong way. And it's left its mark. That can of course go back to very early childhood.
4. And fourthly, there is good old-fashioned pride. I know best and I know that my way is right. And if someone else helps, then they might make some suggestions that would make me reconsider how I do it. And I certainly don't want that. I like to do things my way.

You might be thinking, what on earth has this got to do with a man coming to Jesus at night, and wanting to talk with him ? One of the things Jesus said to Nicodemus was "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.....not to condemn the world, but to save the world".

But it's precisely here that some people feel uneasy. Hang on, Jesus, Light of the world to guide me, definitely. Jesus, Good Shepherd, to watch over and care, yes please. Jesus, the truth, yes, in a world of slick media manipulation, we certainly want to know the truth. Jesus the saviour, the rescuer, no thank you. I don't need any of that, thank you very much.

But that would be a big mistake:

- There are two kinds of help. There is the help that increases the dignity of the one helped and the help that removes it: Jesus' help, Jesus' rescuing always lifted people and was in a strange sense very complimentary to them. He saved a woman caught in adultery from being stoned by the mob: he literally rescued her, and then at the end, said "I don't condemn you either. Go and leave your life of sin". I

think she heard an amazing compliment there. Everyone else had written her off ages ago. This man really believes I can change. He thinks I can do it.

He took the man who had just completely bottled by saying “I’ve never met this Jesus guy, I’m nothing to do with him” (Peter, saving his own skin on Good Friday) and later, Jesus frees him from the shame of that and appoints him the leader of the early church.

Jesus’ way of helping, saving, rescuing is always one that gives dignity, and increases self-worth, does not remove it. Interestingly, mission societies have really caught on to this now, and call themselves mission partners, and working alongside or under local people. Working with rather than just for.

“God so loved the world that he gave his only Son....not to condemn, but to save the world through him”

And it’s important perhaps to note that this need for help transcends the personal level and has sometimes been seen on a global scale: it’s widely accepted, that for all its flaws, Archbishop Desmond Tutu’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission set up to help south Africa make the transition for apartheid, saved many lives. It prevented a lot of bloodshed and possibly averted a civil war.

By contrast, the German church of the 1930s was embarrassingly weak in the way it welcomed Hitler and Nazism with open arms, and made virtually no effort to save that nation from going further down a disastrous path.

The very name Jesus comes from the old Jewish name ‘Yeshua’ which means, the Lord saves.

And finally, reaching out for help can really enrich a relationship. One of the most awkward parishioners I have ever had was prickly, confrontational and incapable of smiling, until the day I asked her to help me with something. The landscape changed dramatically at that moment and we developed a really good relationship.

Somebody with an unusual but very strong Christian faith, once said to me “I had known Jesus as my companion and guide for years. But then there was something quite personal and private that I couldn’t control or come to grips with. And it was at that moment, and dealing with that, that I got to know him as Saviour as well. It enriched my faith immeasurably.”

As we head towards Easter, and towards Jesus riding into Jerusalem, let’s unashamedly join with those shouting Hosanna to the Son of David, the word Hosanna, incidentally, meaning ‘Please deliver us’.

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