

*Step up, step out... the
power of muscle
memory*



I am one of the world's procrastinators. It takes me a while to get myself moving.... All good intentions, not so much the activating of them. We get tired, don't we; or perhaps we don't have much confidence; or perhaps the world has taught us, one way or other, that it's not worth trying... there's so many reasons why we "do what we should not do, or do not do what we should have done" as the Book of Common Prayer puts it.

I remember as a school child a once-in-a-childhood trip to the cinema - watching Kevin Costner in *Robin Hood, Prince of Thieves*. And I remember being struck by the phrase a wise guru said to Robin – *The road to hell is paved with good intentions*. For some unknown reason it struck a chime with me.... Often I seem pretty good at walking down that road.

I know I told you all I needed to give up mindless scrolling on Facebook when I am tired. I was happy to report to the Wednesday mass the other week that I have pretty much succeeded.

..... I now scroll on Instagram....

Ahem, anyway. Whilst doing so, I met a little parakeet called Dolly. She's over twenty years old, and has had a terrible life. When she was adopted by her new owners she had no feathers, and was too weak to step up onto their hands, too scared to explore her environment. They have been sharing the journey of her recovery, and her learning to step up... not just onto their hands, but into the joys and adventures of life. Slowly learning to trust, building her physical and emotional strength back... A new beginning. And one born of challenge and love. Challenge that just accepting life and going along with things that are broken is not ok... and love that calls us to life, to action and to courage. And every time Dolly steps up, she gets stronger. Every time we respond, we find it

easier to do so again. Muscles of imagination and heart, muscles of the body – Jesus calls us to act; and, through acting, to participate in love, and through participating in love... to learn how to act. It makes muscle memory.

It's important to remember this gospel story today is straight after the cleansing of the temple.... Jesus started this little exchange with the priests about the brothers and the harvest by throwing tables and challenges.

Challenging us to look within ourselves at why we do things, or don't do things - and hold them up to the gospel of love and our response to that love, and the way we get on and share it.

Calling us to change our minds – or maybe to make up our minds. To step up like Dolly the parakeet and her rescuers, into the adventures of life, challenging the oppressions and pains, confusions and weariness, of the world - with an insistence that there can be a harvest of healing and new growth.

And now, in today's conversation with the uncertain priests, it's not physical tables he turns, but hearts – each heart that makes the Temple of God that brings in a harvest of healing and love; of new beginnings in this world.

The road to hell may be paved with good intentions... but... there is another Way. Jesus is *the Way, the Truth, and the Life*¹... and he continually invites us to step up and out with him, to join in the joy of bringing in the harvest. "*Why will you die, O house of Israel?*" asks the Prophet Ezekiel in our reading today - "*For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord God. Turn, then, and live*²" ...

I wonder how old these sons are in the gospel today. Are they teenagers? Just starting out on the journey of life? Have you ever tried nagging a teenager to lend a hand? ... I'll just leave that there.

¹ John 14: 6

² Ezekiel 18: 32

But maybe ... maybe they're mature men, still living at home as families did all together in those days. Because let's face it, sometimes we all need a bit of nagging, no matter how old we are And I will just leave that there too.... It's always easy to think the gospel is about someone else – and it is, always, but it's always about us too 😊

I do wonder, that son – sitting on the sofa, doing whatever displacement activity was to hand in ancient Israel ... how did he get from sofa to vineyard? We shall never know. But something happened in his heart where he found courage to step up, and to respond in that particular way at that particular time.

We get these moments of invitation every day. And it's all about how we respond. Sometimes it can take a lot of courage, actually, to step up and out.

Jesus says to us – *do not be afraid, I am calling you by name, and you are mine*³.

The gospel doesn't tell us what happened next. It doesn't tell us how the harvest went. It doesn't tell us how the first son, who didn't go to help in our reading, finally joined the harvesting. Or if others were invited in.

(But our gospel last week told us they were – those last-minute harvesters receiving the full wages of love⁴

.... and this week tells us that, in the end.... that first son, who said he would follow and didn't ... will not be lost.)

Notice Jesus says that the tax collectors and prostitutes are going *ahead* into the kingdom, *ahead*, not *instead*...

So, we know it's never too late.

I am the Way, says Jesus... and I **will** come and take you to myself⁵.

³ Isaiah 43: 1

⁴ Matthew 20: 1 - 16

⁵ John 14: 6

So if you're sitting on some sort of metaphorical sofa right now, not knowing how to find the energy, the confidence, the healing.. to join in the harvesting of love in this world, not even knowing if God can really work that way in your life ... take courage and trust from this reading today.

The chief priests come with a question to Jesus

"By whose authority?" they ask....

and Jesus... asks them a question right back... "By what authority", he asks, "did John the Baptist baptise?"...

Their answer is only two words long in the Greek; "Οὐκ οἶδαμεν" – "we don't know" - but perhaps it is the most important admission they could say – or we could say...

Because perhaps after "we don't know", might come the ability to let him know in us, to lift us, and inspire us, and be his strength and life in us. Remember when we let go, and admit what we can't do, it's often then we find ourselves gathered up in a strength and motivation beyond our own. Remember, S. Teresa of Avila says 'you cannot fall out of God's hands, only into them'. And he has the strength where we do not. *Take up your mat, and walk...* he said, and the man who had no strength in himself to rise ... did⁶.

And just like Dolly the parakeet, every time we step up, we find it easier to do so again. Muscles of imagination and heart, muscles of the body – Jesus calls us to act; and, through acting, to participate in love, and through participating in love... to learn how to act.

So never mind that road paved with good intentions... today, every day, God offers us an invitation. Come, he says, follow me... It's never too late to turn a different Way. God's got you in his hands, lifting you. And there's a glorious harvest to bring in together. Because the Way of love... that's a way that leads us home, with thanksgiving.

⁶ John 5: 8