Carlisle Cathedral 27th September 2026

Trinity 17 Proper 21

Ezekiel 18.1-4, 25-end Matthew 21.23-32

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I have been reading today's bible passages whilst also catching up with the report from Lady Justice Thirlwall's inquiry into the events at the Countess of Chester Hospital, known as the Thirlwall Report. You may know that this report was prompted by the concerning events highlighted during and following the trial of nurse Lucy Letby.

As I was reading, I became aware that there could be a connection with this report and other reports that have been carried out into many different areas of our national and church life. And the readings set for today.

First, I want to look at the passage from Ezekiel. These verses we heard read this morning are about blame compared to individual responsibility, prompting a suggestion of turning away from wrongdoing to turn to God. Bound up in it all is death or life.

The Thirlwall Report looks at events in the life of The Countess of Chester Neonatal Unit following the increase of deaths on that unit. In the report's conclusion Lady Justice Thirlwall said she discovered "*multiple and repeated mistakes and failings by organisations and individuals*". The report therefore highlights the institutional shortcomings of management, governance, safeguarding and a culture that meant there was a failure to protect babies as well as the incorrect action of individuals.

The report is shocking reading, and many lives were affected because of these failures. First and foremost, the families of the babies who died or were harmed.

One or more person's choice of action or failing to be courageous and speak out as well as the institutions' failure to follow correct procedures lead to many people being left bereft.

Individuals are accountable for their actions and omissions, but systems and cultures can enable, excuse, or conceal those failures.

Ezekiel rejects the idea that people are only victims of forces beyond their control and highlights our personal responsibility. Yet the prophet also recognises that people act within a wider social context. If I tripped up walking along English Street, I could look for someone to blame , the council maybe if the paving was uneven or do I say stupid me I should look where I am going and be more careful.

What does all this mean for us, do we take responsibility for our actions, or is it easier to blame someone else if things go wrong?

Of course, Ezekiel is really likening our decisions to our relationship with God. Here God's judgement is real, but so is God's willingness to forgive and restore. No one is imprisoned by their past, and no one is disqualified from the possibility of a new beginning. We can choose life or death. We can choose repentance or living a life just as we want with no consideration for the other.

And so, this makes it easy to link this passage with the story from Matthew.

We've skipped over a chapter and a bit from last week's reading.

We've missed Jesus' riding into Jerusalem on a donkey; we will save that for Holy Week. We've missed Jesus turning over the tables in the Temple and showing his righteous anger. We have missed Jesus returning to Bethany and cursing a fig tree before coming back to Jerusalem and the Temple.

This time he is challenged by the chief priests and elders. Biblical scholars think that these worthies really wanted to ask Jesus, 'are you the Messiah?' they are too afraid to ask directly. Instead, they ask him what power or authority he has to do all the things he has been doing and to teach in the way he does.

Again, we assume they have been following Jesus or have spies watching him.

Once again in true Jesus' style he responds not with an answer but a question. What about John 'Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?"

Matthew then reports this off-stage conversation.

The chief priests and elders were caught out if we say one thing we've lost because we didn't believe John and if we say the other the crowd will have us. So, the only thing they can say is we don't know.

They haven't answered Jesus, Jesus will not answer them. Instead, he tells them a story about a man and his two sons . The story is simple they and we as readers are asked to work out which is the better son. Is it the one who answer no to his father's request but then did what he was asked or the one who said yes and didn't do what he said he would.

The right answer is easy and obvious even those questioning Jesus could tell him the right answer. But then Jesus plays the ace card you may have that answer correct, but it is not what **you** do.

'Truly I tell you, the tax-collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of **you.** For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax-collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.

Ouch that hurt. Jesus was showing his authority in what he said to the officials. They had been like the son who said yes but didn't act on it.

Now we have all been in positions like this. We say we will do things and then don't, we end up letting people down, letting ourselves down and maybe even letting God down. We can feel awful about it we can of course say sorry, to those we have let down, we can try to make up for our error.

When we let God down by the way we act, we are called to repent. Repent meaning literally turn around. In baptism we are called upon to turn from our sin and turn to Christ. It is helpful to envisage it as a physical turning. What is it in your life you need to turn away from and then turn back to Christ?

We turn our back on the wrong in the past and turn towards Christ in whose hands is our future, responding to John and Jesus invitation: 'Repent, the kingdom of heaven in near.'

Those officials in our Gospel story today either hadn't got who Jesus was or were trying to trick him so they could destroy him and why? Because he seemed to be usurping their authority. They had the chance to change, but they didn't take it. They were afraid of losing their power. Their authority.

In the following verses in Matthew's Gospel Jesus continues to tell stories about who is in or out of God's commonwealth God's kingdom. And it is not always who you think. Today we are shown that we simply have to make the right choices to be in.

Many of those organisations and individuals highlighted in the Thirlwall report made the wrong choice certainly didn't make the right choice. The effect was devastating.

Let us in our lives take John the Baptist and Jesus invitation and repent turn around and have the courage to be part of God's commonwealth, God's Kingdom or as Ezekiel's prophecy helps us see clearly, we can choose life or death; repentance or living a life just as we want with no consideration for the other.

Turn around to follow in Jesus' way, the way that leads to life. And know for yourself that which St. Augustine spoke about and is prayed in our collect today:
Almighty God, you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in you: pour your love into our hearts and draw us to yourself, and so bring us at last to your heavenly city where we shall see you face to face, Amen.