

Sermon St. James, Trinity 15, Year A – Sunday 28 September 2014

Exodus 17.1-7

Ps. 78.1-7

Philipp. 2.1-13

Matt. 21.23-32

'By whose authority are you doing these things? Parable of the two sons – one who says no, but then changes his mind and does as asked; one who says 'yes', but does not act on it.
Mike Sares 'Pure Scum', IVP Books 2010

Would you go to a church that's called 'Scum of the earth Church'?

Last week, Geoffrey asked the question – 'who would you eat with'?

Today, I want to think about 'who would you be seen with at church'?

There is indeed a church called 'Scum of the earth' in downtown Denver, Colorado. The pastor, Mike Sares, was on Sabbatical here in Cambridge earlier this year, staying in the curate's house on Hulatt Road. He and his wife Mary attended our Sunday services a few times, and Mike came to the meditation group.

Mike was involved in founding this church. He came to train for ministry in his forties, after a long search of how to live out his sense of vocation, and while at seminary in Denver was the 'singles ministry director' for a large, traditional Presbyterian Church in Denver. When he started there most of the singles were in their thirties and forties, but during his first year there younger singles in their twenties started coming. It turned out they were involved with a fledgling 'ska band' (ska music originated in Jamaica in the 1950ies, and is a blend of [Caribbean](#) music and [American jazz](#) and [rhythm and blues](#)).

Mike was taken along to their concerts and took an interest in what they were doing. The band, which is called 'Five Iron Frenzy' grew in popularity, and Mike found himself 'blurring the line between pastor and default band manager'.

The band is made up of Christians, and they started to bring their friends to a Bible Study aimed at these young adults. Over time, they started to attend the main Presbyterian Church service. Mike writes 'come Sunday morning, a number of young adults with tattoos, various body piercings and neon-dyed hair found their seats in the back of church, while senior citizens ...sat up in the front, in their time honoured seats. It was beautiful. *This is what churches should look like*, I thought' (Scum, p. 34.)

Then, things changed drastically. The church where he had been on the staff for five years had hired a new senior pastor. A year into his appointment he asked Mike to resign his position. What followed was a worrying and difficult time for Mike, trying to find another post, until a friend said to him 'If someone gave you the money to do anything, what would you do?' *I would continue the vision creating a church service for those who did not fit in – the church for the left-out.*

As you may be able to guess – this was the conversation that sowed the seed for starting this new Church; the lead singer of 'Five Iron frenzy' was a key person in this, and the people who attended the Bible Study – the first meeting about the Church took place in February 2000, so now 14 years ago.

When it came to deciding the name, the lead singer suggested 'scum of the earth', from 1 Corinthians 4.9-13, where Paul writes about himself 'We are fools for Christ, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong; when reviled, we bless. When we are persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we answer kindly. Up to this moment we have become the sum of the earth, the dregs of humanity'.(REB)

Mike himself was not sure this name was such a good idea, but it was chosen by those involved in this church – and proved to be a real asset.

As Anglicans, members of a Church with a long tradition, we may want to ask 'by what authority has Scum of Earth Church been founded'? Can anybody just go out there and build a church? To meet the needs of a particular group of people?

By what authority?

Whilst this is a questions that definitely has a place within the life of the Church, it is also a question that lends itself to providing a convenient barrier whenever we feel threatened or want to prevent change,

In this morning's gospel from Matthew, the chief priests and scribes use it trying to stop Jesus in his tracks. They are feeling very threatened by Jesus' actions, as he is bringing good news of God's kingdom to all who want to hear it, especially those who don't fit the bill of religious respectability. As we have been hearing over the last few weeks, Jesus liked to spend time with tax collectors, prostitutes and anyone else on the margins of society, who was hungry for what Jesus had to say. That God was like a loving father for them, too, who knew their sense of failing, their brokenness, who offers forgiveness, healing and salvation. Yes, their life-style may not commend them as God fearing people, but they know their need of God, and many of them turned to God having listened to John the Baptist, and then Jesus. Unlike the religious leaders, who just saw Jesus as a threat to their own power and authority.

We have no idea why the new senior pastor at the Presbyterian Church asked Mike to leave – perhaps he and others in the Church did feel threatened – but, by doing so, he opened the way for this church to be founded in Downtown Denver, enabling those who would not come to a traditional Church to have a place to meet Christ in their search for life and healing.

Scum of the earth Church attracts mostly young people and adults, many on the fringe of society, with messy and complicated lives. Mike talks about breaking up fights between punks and goths, who had just attended a church, sitting them down to think about finding other ways to resolve their differences. He and his wife Mary together with a handful of other older, more mature adults, do a huge amount of parenting. He talks about theirs 'being a church full of people who have been hurt throughout their lives, many of them from broken homes. They have every defence up, which makes it difficult for people who want to offer the love of Christ to them. (p.81)

We are reminded of the son in the second half of today's gospel, who says 'no' to begin with, but then does the Father's will. In Jesus time, tax collectors and prostitutes may not have led exemplary godly lives, but they recognised their need of God. We may not think of goths, punks and many of the kids who attend 'Scum of the earth' as examples of Christian living, but they are likely to walk into the kingdom of God ahead of many others.

As the priest-in-charge of a 'respectable' church, I find this a rather challenging gospel. When and how do I hide behind the question 'by what authority', making it a convenient excuse not to take risks and do something new, perhaps radically different? How often am I the son who says 'yes', Lord, I go', but then do not actually do God's will, especially in relation to those who are in real need or different from me. Perhaps, this gospel is a challenge to all of us to reflect on the times we are the son who says 'yes', but don't do anything because we would feel vulnerable, uncomfortable and challenged.

Who would you be seen with at Church? or 'Who do we want to see at Church?

Amen.