

Too big a harvest?

While he was President, JF Kennedy had on his desk the words of an old French prayer: "O God, your sea is so vast, and my boat is so small". Which of those two phrases catches your eye? The vastness of the sea – or the smallness of the boat? One is background; the other is emphasis. We can mishear if we focus on the wrong element. Psalm 115 begins "Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name give the glory". In this case, the psalmist is urging us to focus on the glory of God ... but it is easy to hear the opening phrase and think that the psalmist is wanting us to see ourselves as unworthy, inadequate, irrelevant creatures.

Hebrew, as spoken in Jesus's day, did not have a way of conveying preference – rather it had to use a style that says 'I hate A but I love B'. Sometimes that may be literally true; but there are times that we need to be more subtle and gentle. A tragic example comes at the start of Genesis: Adam and Eve have two sons, Cain and Abel. In Genesis chapter 4, we hear that God loves the sacrifice of Abel AND HATES the sacrifice of Cain. That is what the text says – but is that accurate? Is that a fair way of describing God's attitude? I don't mind others being preferred to me; but it is a completely different matter to be hated.

When Jesus says 'the first shall be last, and the last first', which phrase do you pick up on? 'The last shall be first' sounds generous and kind – it's what happens when we let someone leapfrog us in a queue as their need is great. When we draw attention to a child in the class who has done reasonably well (but tried very hard), we are making 'the last' to be first. But what about 'the first shall be last'? If someone is behaving in a proud superior way, then perhaps they need to be taken down a peg or two. But if they are intentionally demoted to the end, are we simply causing trouble by creating resentment? Consider another well-known phrase: 'many are called, but few are chosen'. It's clear we need to be wise to work out what Jesus may actually have been wishing to convey.

You may be familiar with these words of Jesus from Matthew Chapter 9: 'the harvest is plentiful, but labourers are few'. Maybe on this occasion, both phrases contain an emphasis and meaning that Jesus wants to communicate. 'The harvest is plentiful': there are days when I can simply feel overwhelmed by all that I could do. There are too many opportunities to follow up, too many people to see, avenues to explore – and that can lead to paralysis and demotivation. It takes quite a lot of courage and discernment to be able to say to myself "There is so much I *could* do; but what do I *have* to do?". Similarly, the second phrase needs careful handling: 'labourers are few'. So many church reports published nowadays seem to draw attention to our not having enough money, not enough priests, not enough people but too many church buildings! Decline is not the problem; it's the despair that comes with thinking that we are doing badly, and 'if only we try a bit harder everything will be better'. Labourers may be few, but we are called to be faithful, to trust, and to let God be God. God's ocean is vast; our boat is small. Be still, and remember who is in charge.