

SEPTEMBER 18, 2016

AGM SERVICE

ELDER
MARK HERRMANN

OPENING MUSIC: Monika Strasser

As is customary, prior to beginning the formalities of our Annual General Meeting, we conduct a short period of contemplation.

We'll now sing together the first two verses of the Templer Hymn – Trachtet ruft (Seek ye first of all God's Kingdom) – number 1 in our hymnbooks.

The allocated text for today comes from the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 21, Verses 28-32 and is titled "The parable of the two sons". In the Good News Bible, it reads as follows:

²⁸ Now, what do you think? There was once a man who had two sons. He went to the older one and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' ²⁹ 'I don't want to,' he answered, but later he changed his mind and went. ³⁰ Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. 'Yes, sir,' he answered, but he did not go. ³¹ Which one of the two did what his father wanted?"

"The older one," they answered.

So Jesus said to them: I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. ³² For John the Baptist came showing you the right path to take, and you would not believe him; but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him. Even when you saw this,

you did not later change your minds and believe him.

Without a doubt, we would agree that it was the son who went to work in the vineyard – the older one – who obeyed his father. The younger son was merely paying lip service and had no intention of working. In deciding which of the two truly obeyed the father's instructions, we determine it by identifying the action taken and not the spoken words.

It is clear that actions speak louder than words. In the Temple Society, we strive to be an active Christianity and here I am reminded of the following quote attributed to Mahatma Gandhi, India's political and spiritual leader:

"Your beliefs become your thoughts. Your thoughts become your words. Your words become your actions. Your actions become your habits. Your habits become your values. Your values become your destiny."

An Irish writer, Oisín Feore, provides brief commentaries on Gospel passages. He writes:

"This text is like a pool into which a stone is dropped producing a ripple effect; meaning upon meaning. At first it appears to be a story about two sons, and the human condition of changing one's mind.

Then you read the last verses about those social outcasts who change their lives and win their way to God's kingdom. Jesus is critical of those who refuse to accept John the Baptist's teaching.

Another interpretation identifies the father as God; the son who changes his mind and works in the vineyard as the tax collectors and prostitutes; and the second son as the chief priests and elders.

We live out our faith in a given concrete situation. Instead of trying to interpret a text with the mindset of the past we relate it to the reality in which we live and use the Bible to throw light on this reality.

Read simply as a story drawn from life it speaks to our own changeable, vacillating acceptance of God's word."

So, if actions speak louder than words, we need active participation in our community. As I wrote in my annual report, the TSA membership number is steadily declining – we have actually lost 25% of this number since 1997.

Intending members follow a process, something that has been viewed negatively by some. Yet, it is hardly an onerous process and attempts to impress on the applicant that we seek a commitment. There have also been suggestions made that all confirmands or all associated with TTHA should automatically be made TSA members.

I have two concerns with this: firstly, it conflicts with our liberalism of allowing freedom in religious thinking and, further, I don't see any resulting increase in membership number through such measures suddenly translating into more active community participation.

Nevertheless, it is one of our key challenges, and we have a few, as we plan for and look to our future.

As a closing prayer, I like this quote from Pope John Paul II:

"Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth; and God has placed in the human heart a desire to know the truth – in a word, to know himself – so that, by knowing and loving God, men and women may also come to the fullness of truth about themselves."

To conclude let us sing together verses 6 and 9 of the Templer Hymn.