

Faith

Luke 7, 1-10

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to You, O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen

I have to start by owning up to a guilty secret. It's very difficult for me to do this at the risk of destroying any vestige of credibility that I may still have. What could it be, you wonder – as you're imagination runs riot. Well, it's to do with my television habits and I feel the need to unburden myself and admit that I am an avid watcher of The Apprentice.

Now for those of you who don't know what the Apprentice actually is, let me enlighten you. It is a reality TV show in which a group of young business people vie with one another to become the Apprentice of Alan Sugar, sorry, Lord Sugar to his friends. The winner gets an investment of £250,000 to get a new business idea that they have

dreamt up off the ground and they also get the dubious pleasure of Lord Sugar as their business partner.

How does the noble Lord decide which of these hopefuls will be the recipient of his largesse? Well, each week, the hopefuls, operating in two opposing teams are set a business task that needs to be completed as a team. One team wins, the other loses and someone from the losing team gets pointed at by Lord Sugar who snarls, "You're Fired".

That's how it works and so, you may ask, why do I watch it so avidly? Maybe it's because I have spent my life in business and so can relate to the tasks and the business people trying to complete them? Well no, basically the tasks all tend to be pretty facile and bear little resemblance to the real world of business and the behaviour that they encourage goes against everything I have ever learnt in business.

Each of the contestants appears to have an ego the size of a small planet and their behaviour towards each other is nothing short of appalling. They snipe, shout, snarl, backstab and bad mouth each other at every opportunity. They also display an astonishing degree of arrogance which is only balanced by an equally astonishing degree of incompetence when it comes to the simplest business task.

This week saw the teams in Dubai trying to source 8 Middle Eastern items at the lowest possible cost in order to test their negotiating skills. They had a day to do this and I am quite sure that if I handed any one of you a wad of cash and a shopping list of 8 items you would, as a minimum come back with all 8. It is basically a shopping trip – how difficult could it be?

Well, one team only managed to buy 6 items and they won! The others managed 4, one of which was the wrong

thing. A measure of their complete incompetence was that one of the items was a mahogany oud, standard size. The team leader was convinced that oud was a perfume and despite one of his team pointing out that perfumes were not normally made from mahogany, wasted a lot of the day trying to find this nonexistent fragrance.

Had they taken approximately 5 seconds to type the word 'oud' into Google on one of the many smartphones that they are permanently glued to, they would have found out instantly that an 'oud' is a stringed instrument – made, surprise surprise, from mahogany.

So, if they are so cringingly hopeless, why do I torture myself by watching it? Well of course the reason is, that it's great telly and hilariously funny. To watch people who are so full of their own self importance fail abjectly week after week is quite cathartic. Best of all, we get to sit in

the Boardroom with Lord Sugar and watch as he tells them in great detail just how stupid they have been.

At one stage, I used to worry that the programme was creating a false view of business that would put youngsters off from taking it up as a career. This view that, unless you were a preening bully, you couldn't be a businessman. I'm more relaxed about it now because with each successive series, the contestants have become so stereotyped that they are almost human cartoons and I can't believe that anyone would actually believe that this is the way business people really behave.

It is based on some strange belief that if you want people to follow you and do what you say as a manager, then you need to use your power to bully them into submission. We almost have this in built expectation that, with power comes arrogance. The

contestants in the Apprentice, who have no power in the process compensate with excessive arrogance to create an aura of power.

It's not that surprising and we do, unfortunately have many examples in public life of power inducing arrogance and unacceptable behaviour. Whether it's a small minority of famous TV personalities like Jimmy Saville or Stuart Hall abusing young girls or a small minority of MP's abusing the trust of their constituents and fiddling their expenses, there is little doubt that we can support the premise that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

This famous quotation was made by Baron Acton in 1887 in a letter to Bishop Mandell Creighton. What he actually said was, "Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men" Seems a bit black and white to me but I think the

truth in it is that we are never really surprised when powerful people show themselves to be bad people but are often surprised by the opposite – and there are examples from history of the opposite.

One contrast in today's world that stands out for me is that between two powerful men in Africa. Both became absolute rulers of their nations after bitter struggles. One is Robert Mugabe and the other is Nelson Mandela. Mugabe appears to have followed that well trodden path on achievement of power – that of dictatorship, whereas Mandela has done the opposite.

Mugabe has used his position of power to wreak revenge on those he saw as his erstwhile oppressors whereas Mandela has sought peace and reconciliation. One can't help feeling that history will remember Mandela long after it has forgotten Mugabe.

We are surprised by powerful people like

Mandela who choose humility much more than by powerful people who choose arrogance and even Jesus felt the same way in our reading today when a powerful man showed himself to be humble.

Jesus had just come to Capernaum when he was met by some of the Jewish leaders who sought his help for a Roman Centurion. Now this, in itself was exceptional as the Jews would not normally go out of their way to help the occupying Romans and certainly not a powerful senior soldier. In this case they told Jesus that this man had a beloved slave who was very sick and that he was deserving of help as he was a good and worthy man who loved the Jewish people and even helped them to build their synagogue.

Jesus sets off for the centurion's house – no doubt intrigued by this unusual behaviour from a powerful man but it gets even stranger. The centurion reflects on the request that has been made on his

behalf and then sends another delegation to intercept Jesus. This time they relay the following message from the centurion to Jesus, "Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; therefore I did not presume to come to you. But only speak the word, and let my servant be healed."

Jesus is amazed and says to those around him, "Not even in Israel have I found such faith as this" The messengers return to the centurion's house and find that the slave has been healed.

Now for me, there are a number of things that this story tells us about the nature of faith. Firstly, this expression of faith comes from a powerful man showing great humility and is memorable for that alone. Secondly, a powerful Roman has chosen to put his faith in an itinerant Jewish preacher. Thirdly, Jesus makes great pains to declare the man's faith, putting

it above the faith he has witnessed from the Jews – thereby potentially making himself very unpopular.

Jesus wants to establish that faith is not the preserve of the members of the club, the insiders but can just as well be found in the outsiders, the unexpected believers and I think that is a key message for all of us from today's gospel. Faith can be found in unexpected places and from unexpected people and Jesus wants us all to know that and be open to it. We mustn't allow ourselves to believe that our particular church, or our particular doctrine or even our particular religion is the only path to faith.

We need to be open to the belief that God's love and His word is there for all, not just for Christians and that we should remember to take that message out into the world. We all, I am sure, have friends or family who do not profess a faith. What should we do about them? Should we

evangelise and badger them into coming to church in the belief that they are doomed to eternal damnation if they don't?

Pope Francis shocked a lot of people last week in his Wednesday sermon when he said that all people are redeemed by Christ's sacrifice and he invited his hearers to meet all people, whether they believe or not. Those of our friends and family who don't believe are loved by God just as we are. Christ's sacrifice on the cross was as much for them as it was for us. Many of them are good people doing really good things and we should praise God for them and not condemn them for their lack of declared faith.

Condemnation is God's prerogative and not ours. I would not profess to know the mind of God – all I know is that we were given a great commandment, to love our neighbour as ourselves.

This love should have no boundaries or distinctions. Who knows in what unexpected places we will find faith. Jesus found it in the most unlikely place imaginable in 1st century Palestine – in the heart of a Roman centurion. We might find it in someone equally unlikely but only if we are open minded enough not to prejudge anyone.

Let us pray

Tom Crotty