

I doubt whether anyone reads *The Water Babies* these days. It's a classic Victorian children's book, a fairy tale written by Charles Kingsley which combines protest against child labour and support for Darwin's ideas on evolution with entrenched prejudices against the Irish, Catholics, Jews and Americans. It is highly moral with a strong Christian message, and it is pretty heavy going. I won't tell you the whole story – there's no time – but in summary it is about Tom, who is a poor, grubby, uneducated chimney sweep from the north of England with a cruel master, Mr Grimes. One day he is chased out of a house whose chimneys he has been sweeping, runs away over the moors and eventually gets down into a river, where he is washed away by the fairies and becomes a Water Baby. He has numerous adventures, during which he is given moral guidance by two fairy matriarchs, Mrs DoAsYouWouldBeDoneBy and Mrs BeDoneByAsYouDid. Like any good fairy tale it all turns out right in the end, and Tom, having helped Mr Grimes to find repentance, returns to human form and becomes a brilliant scientist and engineer, all in the name of Progress.

What has all this got to do with the Fourteenth Sunday After Trinity? In our gospel reading we have examples of both types of behaviour. A king is faced with a slave who cannot repay a debt of ten thousand talents – something like £100 million today – a phenomenal amount. Remember that some slaves were hugely responsible officers, trusted to transact business and manage large estates, would handle vast amounts of money and could become rich in their own right. So the king orders the slave, his family and everything they own to be sold. But when the slave asks for time to pay, the king actually forgives him the entire debt – an extraordinarily generous act of mercy and a splendid example of 'Do as you would be done by'. In *The Water Babies*, Mrs DoAsYouWouldBeDoneBy is warm, friendly, kind and forgiving, and the Water Babies love her. But they don't learn how to behave properly and do the right thing, even when this is difficult and unpopular, from her.

The king forgives his slave, but the slave promptly finds a colleague who owes him a hundred denarii – something like fifty pounds – and throws him into prison because he can't pay it back. The forgiven slave isn't following the example the king set him. The Water Babies learned the really hard lessons from Mrs BeDoneByAsYouDid, and that's what happens to the slave. He received mercy but is not being merciful himself, so the king changes his mind and has the slave imprisoned and tortured until everything is repaid.

This seems harsh, especially as Jesus says that this is what will happen to everyone, but with one tremendously important caveat: 'unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart'. God will act towards you in the same way that you have behaved towards others. He will do as you did. It's your choice. You can make mistakes and ask for forgiveness, which you will be given, but if you don't extend the same forgiveness to others, yours will be withdrawn. It's a hard lesson. Tom had to learn it and so do we. We also have to learn that we don't make the decisions; they are in God's hands. This is what Paul is telling the Romans, and he had the same issue with those pesky Corinthians. What you do may be right for you, but it isn't necessarily the only thing that is right, and you can't criticise or condemn others who do things differently.

There's a significant distinction between doing something differently and doing something wrong. The slaves saw that their colleague was behaving wrongly and they reported it. They didn't take it out on him themselves, but raised the issue with the person who could do something about it. Paul says that God will judge what is acceptable. I'm being reminded of this sharply at the moment. I've just started working with people who want to become priests,

and meeting people whose style of Christian prayer and worship is very different from my own. But if it helps them, feeds them, and God speaks to them in that way, I can't say they are wrong, or ask them to change.

There's a lot of judging going on among churches and congregations at the moment. Is it better to have Zoomed services or YouTube services or services in churchyards or car parks, or no services at all? Should archbishops celebrate communion in their kitchens, priests say Mass on their own in church, or people join in with their own bread and wine at home? The people who are tremendous with technology look down on the ones who are frightened by Facebook. Some people who got back together in church in July think that clergy who haven't opened their churches yet are just plain lazy. But none of us know the actual circumstances. We don't see the phone calls, the support for lonely and isolated neighbours, the bereavement ministry. We don't know about the vicar whose family is shielding, the churches that are too small to open for a socially-distanced service, or the people who are too elderly – or too much back at work – to be on a rota for weekday opening.

We are living in strange times, and very little is normal. We can't even be sure what we will be able to do in a couple of weeks. But everyone is working in honour of the Lord and giving thanks to God for what they can do. Let's do as we would be done by, rejoice in what we have, and support everyone who is struggling.