

Reading: Matthew 21:28-32

There is a well-known saying “Actions speak louder than words.” And to this we can add St Francis of Assisi’s advice, “Preach the gospel always, if necessary, use words.”

Jesus, just like a COVID test, is really getting up the noses of the temple leaders. So, to reinforce what he is teaching Jesus offers them and us a story of two sons. One promises to help and doesn’t. The other won’t promise but goes and helps, “Which one,” Jesus asks them, “does what the father asks?” Of course, it’s the one who acts not the one who talks: actions speak louder than words. Jesus concludes “Yes I tell you that all the crooks and whores are going to proceed you into the kingdom. John preached good news and even when you saw people’s lives changed for the better you wouldn’t change yours.” Is it little wonder then that Jesus is on the way to the cross when he says things like this?!

Simple actions are more powerful than words.

John McLister who was the curate here told me a story about how actions speak louder than words. When he was young and very scruffy, he decided to go to church. He wasn’t a Christian but thought he might have a look. Anyway, to cut a long story short he arrived at the evening service very late. There was a famous visiting preacher that night and the church was packed. There wasn’t a seat to be found in the whole church. He wandered up the front and a kindly man offered him his seat. So, after the song was over he sat down. It wasn’t until the service was well underway that John realised that the man giving him his seat was in fact none other than the guest preacher. Apart from intense embarrassment John recalled that whatever the guest preacher said that night, and he can’t remember a word he said, that simple action of giving up his seat for a total scary stranger said more about love than any sermon. On the

strength of that one action he decided to give Christianity a go and the rest, as they say, is history.

We all know the power of simple actions done with much love. When my father died suddenly when I was young, I can still recall those that hugged me, those that held my hand, those who showed practical care. But I couldn't tell you one word of what was said.

“It is not necessary to do great things,” Mother Teresa told her nuns “it is enough to do small things with great love.”

Sometimes of course what the community picks up about Christians can be wide of the mark. I heard of one woman who was just given the worst of news by her doctor. “We must call the vicar,” she said. “Don't worry,” said the neighbour, “I have lived across the road from the church and hall all my life. I know all the prayers. I can lead us.” So, they all bowed their heads: “Legs eleven 11, unlucky for some 13, Kelly's eye number 1, 66 clickety click.”

I think it would be pretty hard to be around St Peter's for very long and not notice love in action. Whether it's the care that the Welcomers take, or the effort people make to talk to strangers at morning tea. Isn't it great to have morning tea again? Or the groups we have for the lonely, or those struggling to speak English or young parents, or the money and prayers for the developing world, or the time taken over pastoral care or preparing people for marriage or baptism. Loving action is at the heart of all we do.

At college we had to go on a placement and ours was to Grey Lynn. Auckland was very different in those days. You could drive across the harbour bridge in under two hours and Grey Lynn had not been done up. You could still buy a house there for under two million. The parish had a funny little church hall thing. Every Sunday the cunning vicar used to leave the door of the church wide open. Directly across the road lived a Hindi family. They never came to church, but they would always sit on the veranda and watch the service. They couldn't

hear the words we said, or the prayers or the hymns, but they could watch the actions. They especially liked the bit when the bread and wine was held up. Grandma used to get all the kids to come and watch. They would wave and smile when we arrived each Sunday for church. It wasn't long until they joined as for morning tea and the rest, as they say, is history.

I don't know about you, but I get worried about this point in a sermon that the preacher is going to ask me to do something I'm not up for. Actions speak louder than words, agreed, but we may feel our actions are so humble, so modest so ... well, useless.

But let us take heart. God's economy is an economy of grace the smallest things done in love can have a big, big impact.

If ever there was a time when actions speak louder than words, it's in our COVID world. Every time we wash our hands well, or record our visit, or if we get sick, staying home, we are doing a simple action with great love for our fellow New Zealanders. Last week one unnamed New Zealander with their simple action did more for our mental health and the health of the economy than perhaps any other. Returning from India even though they had passed through two weeks of isolation and two negative tests, on getting sick they put themselves straight back into isolation without any prompting and contacted authorities. Actions speak louder than words.

The power of Jesus was that what he said and what he did lined up so well. They call this integrity. Jesus had total integrity. My prayer is simply that we might grow more and more like him.