

Giving an 'A'

Is 49: 1-7; Jn 1:29-42

Ben Zander is the founder and musical director of the Boston Philharmonic Orchestra. Together with his wife, Roz, he has written a book entitled 'The Art of Possibility'. It discusses certain practices of living. One of these they call 'Giving an A'. This idea started when Ben was teaching a class in musical performance to some post graduate students. He was aware that students were always very concerned about the marks they were going to achieve. So when they played music their pieces they were very tense because of not wanting to make any mistakes. Instead of focusing on the feeling and expression in the music, they were more concerned about not making errors.

Ben decided to try a new approach. He told them at the beginning of the course that he was giving them all an A mark in advance – hence the phrase 'giving an A'. But there was a condition - they had to write him a letter, dated the end of the year, although it was written at the beginning. The letter had to begin with the words, 'I got my A because...' They would then proceed to tell the story of what would have happened to them by the end of the year, that was in line with their excellent mark. The emphasis was not so much on what they had achieved, but on the person they had become; the ways in which they had developed during the year.'

So for example, one student wrote, 'I got an 'A', because I had the courage to examine my fears and I realised that they have no place in my life. I changed from someone who was scared to make a mistake, to someone who knows she has a contribution to make to other people, musically and personally.... I have accepted the joy that comes from knowing that my music can change the world...' The Zanders write, 'This A is not an expectation to live up to, but a possibility to live into.'

So what's the relevance of all this? I see Jesus saying in effect to Simon Peter in the gospel story, 'I'm giving you an 'A'. When Jesus sees Simon, he says to him, 'You are Simon, son of John. You are to be called Cephas or Peter.' The meaning of Cephas or Peter is of course 'Rock'. Jesus is saying to Peter, 'Others may see in you a fickle and volatile character; I see in you the potential of what you can become. I see in you a rock of strength and dependability for my church and kingdom. I'm giving you an 'A'. And that's what Peter proceeds to become – a rock foundation for the early church

Talking of rock and stone, Michelangelo, the great painter and sculptor was busy working one day on a big block of marble. Someone asked what he was doing, and he replied, 'I am releasing the angel imprisoned within this marble.' For Michelangelo, in every block of stone or marble there lay hidden a beautiful statue. He only had to remove the excess material to reveal the work of art within. And that's how God sees us. God says to us 'You don't have to prove yourself; you don't have to kill yourself working for an A.

'By grace you have already been saved'. I've given you an A already. All you have to do now is live into the person that I have made you.' God says, 'You're part of the orchestra, just relax and play your part – whether that's first violinist or the triangle player.

Listen to how God's chosen servant describes himself in the passage we read in Isaiah. It's a passage that speaks about the coming Messiah but also about God's faithful people down the ages. God's servant says, 'The Lord called me before I was born...He made my mouth like a sharp sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me a polished arrow in his quiver. He said to me, 'You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified.' That sounds to me like being given an 'A', don't you think?

Our Covenant service two weeks ago reminds us of God's covenant with us; his commitment to you and me, sealed in the blood of Jesus. God isn't planning to let go of us; he's not planning to drop us from the orchestra. 'You're part of my orchestra', he says. 'Now continue to grow into the player I know you are.

Now all of this doesn't mean that we just sit back and do nothing. Remember, like Ben Zander's students, we must do our part to become that person we predicted we'd be by the end of the course. So, we'll want to make sure we show up at class and do the other things we need to do. But all of this we are doing, not to earn an A by the end, but because we know we've already been given an A and we're co-operating with God to grow into that person.

This also doesn't mean that we should ignore or underestimate the seriousness of sin. Sin needs to be recognised and dealt with. The first part of our gospel reading talks about Jesus, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. We need to deal with the past in order to become the work of art that God made us to be. The writer of Hebrews says, 'Let us throw off everything hinders and the sin that clings so tightly to us, and let us run with perseverance the race set out for us.'

There is one final thing I want to add, and that is that God wants us to give other people an 'A' too. We need to see people as they can be; as God sees them. Not only the nice ones, but everyone. The person at work who gets your goat; the driver who cuts you off; Aunt Agatha who drives you crazy. When you give people an 'A', you find yourself viewing them differently. You see in them the statue that is hidden there, rather than the roughness on the outside. 'I think Jesus sums it up when he says, 'A new commandment I give you, that you love one another as I have loved you.' 'As I have given you an A, so you should give others an A too.'

I close with a story about a certain monastery. It had fallen on hard times. The monks were getting old and the enthusiasm and vitality seemed to have gone out of the work there. The Abbot, who was in charge, wanted to speak to some outside person about this. So he visited the local Rabbi. The Rabbi didn't have any ready solution. All he said was, 'Remember the Messiah is one of you.'

The Abbot reported this message back to the other monks and each of them began to think, 'Who could it be?' Maybe the Abbot, he's been here the longest. Or maybe Brother John, he prays the best. Or maybe Brother Martin, he's so full of kind deeds. And me...no, surely not me, Lord; I couldn't mean that much to you, could I? So the monks began to see each other and themselves with a new respect. The atmosphere at the monastery began to change, and a new vibrancy was evident in it and through it to the surrounding community.

'You are Simon, but you will be called Peter, the Rock.'