

## First Sunday of Lent – YrA - 26 February 2023

### *Message – Difference!*

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Source of All Being, Eternal Word, and Holy Spirit, give us attentive humility that we may enter, with love, the worlds of others. **Amen.**

Today's readings, in one way or another, give Christianity a bit of an image problem. For example, we have sought to judge others, to identify those who are, in our eyes, failing to follow Christ. This law bound version of Christianity is the faith I grew up with, yet, it is a false reflection of the life of Christ.

That does not mean that Jesus did not judge others but rather that it was, and is, always with the offer of forgiveness and never with the desire to exclude others. This was most obviously reflected in the people with whom Christ chose to associate, those who had room for improvement. Christ was happy to engage with anyone but was most often found with those who were on the outside, not the inside.

Despite this, the church has invested most of its effort in defining who is on the inside. The place where Christ was rarely found. Christ's most notable venture inside was to turn over all the tables and cause disruption. This should cause us deep concern but we still seem to be excluding others.

The Genesis reading provides a double problem. Taken literally, the creation narratives of Genesis do not correspond with a scientific understanding of the universe. They don't even correspond with each other, to the point that it is assumed the narrative of the seven days of creation has a different author

from the stories of the creation of human kind and the meaning of human existence and explanation for why life is so hard.

You will rightly guess that, with my background in physics, I don't believe we have to take the narratives literally. However, we do have to take them seriously. What matters is our response to these narratives: Whether taken literally or as myth, stories that contain essential truths without necessarily being literally true, we can still respond to the stories.

These stories are particularly problematic in a world that believes that nothing is absolute and conceives of the equal validity of everyone's personal truths. Yet, our faith denies such a relativistic position and claims there is a reality. These stories set us within that reality. This does not mean to say that there are not important insights from postmodernism. We need to recognise the limitations of our knowledge of the universe, to recognise the ways in which our own life stories shape our perception of the world, to recognise that other people may with equal conviction and validity have a different perspective.

As we go about our daily lives, we are largely unaware of our assumptions unless we consciously seek out those who are different from ourselves. Even then, we have to develop the skill of attentive openness to be able to spot and explore the differences. This is the core skill of spiritual care for other, of chaplaincy. Effectively, we are called to be chaplains to the world, to meet people where they are, as did Christ. When we enter their world, we will start to see how hard it is to hear the Word of Christ, that seems so clear and obvious to us. Only when we start to understand the perspectives of others will we be able to adequately communicate the love of God with them.

And so, we come to a further problematic part of the Genesis narrative, it is very hard to talk about sin. I am currently thinking, I'd much rather be talking about the Trinity, generally voted the least favourite topic by preachers. At least here in church we mostly understand the idea of sin. But we have to face it that no one wants to be told they are wrong. It is hard enough to admit even to ourselves that we could do better never mind others knowing it.

The narrative of Genesis chapter three is an exploration of the nature of sin, though it never uses the word. It may also be understood as explaining why life is so hard. Somewhat heretically, I admit, I hang lightly to that causal connection that might be seen by some in this passage. Returning to Job, my favourite book of the Bible, simple ideas of cause and effect for suffering simply don't make sense. Three short narratives, the first three chapters of the Hebrew Scriptures, cannot say all that there is to say on the nature of God, Life, and the Universe.

These three short narratives give us a starting point that is then explored through the rest of the scriptures, through the traditions of our faith, and through our lives, our lived experiences. So, hanging lightly to our first reading, what might we acknowledge in our own lives.

Sometimes, like Adam and Eve, we try to make ourselves equal to God. We are tempted to think we are in control. Sometimes, we put ourselves at the centre of everything. Yet, the world is not centred on any one of us. We are an example of life, life is not about us, we are about life. When we live life to the full, when we give away our own life for the life of others, we find that we receive far more than we give.

Contrary to the world's view, life is not a zero sum game. It is not the case that in order for one person to gain another must lose. In God's economy there is always enough and together we have more than enough but only together.

We live in a world that is imperfect, that is another part of the narrative of today's Hebrew Scriptures. But, we also live in a world where we can and are called to work towards bringing about something that is closer to the perfection of God's realm.

So, just for fun, let's turn to Paul's letter to the Romans. Much of Paul's writing is hard for us to understand. Paul's logic is often not what we would consider logic, even the "therefore" at the start of today's passage is somewhat tenuous. There are links to the preceding passage but this argument does not logically follow from it. Paul is using rhetorical devices but some of the leaps are beyond us.

Do we see the comparisons that Paul makes between Adam and Jesus? I don't. It seems that there is something innately Adam and Eve like in all of us. From time to time we want to put ourselves at the centre of everything and we lose perspective on how we fit into the greater whole. It seems more like there is an absolute contrast between the earthlings, Adam and Eve, and Christ. And in recognising that difference we start to see that such a remarkable life has significance for us all.

This however is not Paul's argument, on this occasion. Here he is able to assume much of the worldview of those to whom he is writing, a worldview that is very different from our own. This is a passage in desperate need of interpretation and re-writing for today's world. You may or may not agree with that but in

that diversity of view lies the challenge of conveying the love of God using words. The meaning is dependent on so many things.

And so, finally, to the gospel: Jesus, called or driven into the wilderness, these temptations are beyond our experience so the whole passage is too easily written off as a fanciful tale. If these are Jesus's experiences, it is hard to see how Jesus is in any way like us and shared our experiences.

Yet, Matthew writing for his Jewish audience could assume that they knew the story of the people of Israel in the wilderness and that they would see that where the people of Israel had failed so in each case Christ was able to respond with the word of God, all drawn for the Deuteronomy account of Israel's own failures in the wilderness. Matthew is saying to his readers, here is the one who has faced every test and still remained faithful to Yahweh-Elohim, The Lord-God.

To make sense of these passages we need to draw on all of our God given gifts and talents. We need to enter the world of those who wrote them and of their audiences. The alleged quote of Francis "Preach the Gospel at all times. Use words if necessary." Has become so oft repeated for good reason. Words are more easily misunderstood than actions. We must be ready to explain our actions, how it is the love of God that motivates us, but for us to communicate that love we must get to know others first who may be very different from ourselves and that is often best initiated through action.

May God give us the attentiveness and humility to enter the world of others so that we can truly reveal the light and love of Christ. Amen.