

Sunday, 19th July 2020

Sermon Trinity 6 2020 Matthew 13: 24-30, 36-43; Romans 8:12-25

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In spiritual direction we're told to take notice of what provokes us because it's likely to be also the thing that can teach us. I am well provoked by today's gospel reading and have been struggling to work out what it might be saying this week. And in one sense it may seem perfectly reasonable that those who are evil get burned in hell at the end-time whilst the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom..... but there's so much I **don't** understand about it Where, for instance, does God's grace fit in? What of God's outrageous, extravagant love? God's love and God's grace have been what's motivated me in my life; they've underpinned what I try to be and how I have tried to live. So this kind of gospel reading completely flummoxes me.

And It has taken me many years to realise that although I **believe** that God's love and God's grace go right to the heart of the gospel message, there is still a subconscious part of me that **behaves** as if it still believes in a God of judgment; that still holds on to the biblical readings which speak of harsh judgment at end-times.

And this, I think, is very common among Christians of my generation because, certainly when I was growing up, God's judgement seemed to be the more dominant message. And somehow, despite knowing God as a God of love and mercy and grace, we still think we have to try to EARN God's love and that otherwise, God will judge us. But, in my conscious being, I know this is not true. We're all sinners; we all make mistakes. Learning from our mistakes is what makes us human. Take the story of the Prodigal son for instance where it's not the son who's done everything by the book who gets praised. Rather, God has a soft spot for the son who's done a whole lot of things wrong but then realises his mistakes. And even before he's had the chance to say sorry, his Father is celebrating his return.

but I also struggle with the idea that there are good people and bad people – we're all of us a mixture of good and bad! Sometimes we get it wrong and sometimes we get it right. It's not an either/or, black and white kind of division. Though all the 'end-times' readings seem to suggest that it is. Think of the story of the sheep and the goats for instance.

But, here's the thing: **God** knows we're all sinners. He knows we spend our lives trying to discern which are bad and which are good decisions and still he loves us. He is full of grace – giving us wonderful 'things' which we have in no way **earned**. When Peter asks Jesus "How many times should I forgive? As much as seven times?" Jesus replies, "not 7 times but 7 times 70". Forgiveness is part of the very essence of God – always!

So is today's gospel something particular about end times? ... about there being some point in time at which those who have chosen a path of evil no longer get the chance to repent and come back to God? Because I don't think anybody **starts out** evil. We're told that God puts something of himself into **every** aspect of creation, not only humans, but all creatures and all of our planet so all things and all people start out in harmony with God.

But we do have choices So maybe those who consistently choose wrongly: choose bad and not good, maybe there'll be some point for them at the end-time when they've left too late to repent? But I'm not convinced.....

And, anyway, what might it mean if this is so? Are we to behave in our lives as if the end times will come upon us now? Are we to choose to do good out of fear for what will happen to us if we choose bad? I'm not convinced God wants us to make our decisions from fear..... I think God shows us His extravagant and gracious love so that we in turn can show others some of that same love. God wants love, not fear, to motivate our choices.

And a couple of ideas resonate with this for me.... Firstly, that all of us are here on earth to work at **birthing** God in us.... like St Paul says in our reading from Romans this morning: the whole of creation has been groaning in labour painsGod is hidden within us , all of us, and our one task in life is to bring God to birth, to bring God into our consciousness and reveal him in our lives, in how we are and in what we say and do. Bernadette Farrell's words – on the screen – say that most powerfully to me.

But - and this is very important - we can't do this for the sake of our **own** salvation. For me there's no such thing as **individual** salvation. Our God is a God of relationship, loving relationship, so we can only bring God to birth in us by also becoming people of loving relationship – people who realise that we can only grow towards God by loving God's creatures, human and otherwise.

Which brings me to the second idea – which is that “we are all walking each other home”. We don’t need to worry about end-times – we’re 13.8 billion years into creation and I doubt we’ll see the end-point in our life-times: we just need to work on bringing God to birth in us here and now... and walking each other home..... as it says really powerfully in the hymn “Brother, sister, let me serve you”. And interestingly this hymn speaks very much about two-way support! None of us has all the answers – each of us gleans a little bit of wisdom through our experiences of life; and most, if not all, of that wisdom is learned from the pain and suffering we encounter. So just as we can serve others, we can also learn from them too. And the truth is that we’re likely to learn most from those who have suffered most which might well be the people we least think we’ll learn from: maybe drug addicts, or homeless people, those who have served time in prison or refugees? Suffering teaches more than all the comfort in the world so we shouldn’t be afraid of suffering...

Today I leave you therefore with some questions to ponder:

What suffering have you experienced in your own life; and what wisdom has it taught you?

What suffering can you see in others which might be a source of teaching for you?

Are you brave enough to embrace it?