

Pentecost, 5B

Readings, 1 Samuel 17: 33-37, 40-54, Psalm 9:9-20, 2 Corinthians 6:1-13, Mark 4:35-41

Seeing with Depth

Introduction

These next few weeks we move into a new rhythm of Gospel readings: they are all from Mark, and they all deal with questions that have to do with demons of one sort or another. And therein lies the problem: How to manage these readings, how to make sense of the stories that we will hear. Today I want to set the scene; no more than that. I want to explain to you, the way the ancients thought, how they interpreted the world around them; and I want to do this beginning with how *we* moderns think, how *we* interpret the world around us. Once we understand the difference, the difference in optic that we use, then we will be set for the next few weeks.

Us and Today

Today, in the 'developed' world, we look at things in a particular way. We can sum it up as "what you see is what there is". In the philosophical world there is a name for this way of thinking: it is called "positivism". In essence, positivism holds that all knowledge is verifiable, that the only real knowledge is scientific knowledge. If we cannot objectively verify something, then it has no meaning. The Frenchman Auguste Comte, living at the end of the 18th century and through the first half of the 19th century, was the champion of this sort of thought, influencing a whole range of intellectual disciplines, not just science. In the English-speaking world, positivism, "what you see is what there is" deeply influenced philosophical inquiry and led to a school of thought called "logical positivism". This school, led by a gentleman called A.J Ayer, held that only statements of *pure logic* had any meaning. So, statements about faith, statements about values: indeed, any statements that involved speculation or introspection, were considered meaningless. Think about it for minute: if language could only legitimately touch upon verifiable things, things we see and can logically conclude - then it would be very limited indeed. The deeper questions of meaning - both individual and social - could never be discussed. The speculative questions of human existence, could never be raised, never considered.

I remember years ago, having read AJ Ayer's famous book, "Language Truth and Logic", being unimpressed. "How can we live as human beings", I asked myself, "if our thought and language can only be reduced to what we see, to what is verifiable?" Happily, many people have thought the same as I, many people rejected positivism. However, positivism has made an indelible imprint upon us and made the majorities of the developed west, deeply suspicious of the religious, or of anything that tries to see more deeply.

For my part, unconvinced by modern positivism and in particular AJ Ayer, I continued to believe that "what you see is *not* all that there is", "there is more to reality than what meets the eye", that *reality runs deeper*, that reality is more complex, than what we straight-forward moderns tend to think. And so, to biblical thought!

Them and Then

For the early Christians, as for the ancient's generally, this *depth to reality* was summed up in the idea of demons. They were sharply aware, less naïve than we, that reality is complex, that reality has a way of escaping human control, that it is given to a dark side. Now, while I was not a positivist, nor have I been the sort of person to see devils, gargoyles, and trolls, popping out of every corner. It seemed to me that the biblical view was a tad fantastic, as in

'full of fantasy': if not paranoia. How then to take on board, the biblical idea of reality's depth, where there is more than what meets the eye, without becoming delusional?

To See with Depth

So, I turn to this idea of *'seeing with depth'*. What we need to understand, if we are to understand the early Christian language at all, is this: not to get carried away with the demon language, in itself, but to understand that to which it points, that which it seeks to explain: reality's complexity, reality's mysteriousness, the way in which reality unaccountability gets out of hand, out of our control, into the hands of forces and powers that appear to be beyond us, forces that are potentially chaotic, and destructive.

May I end with an example of how modern Christians have had to re-learn the wisdom seeing with depth, the wisdom of biblical demon-language, as a pathway to understanding reality better. The rise of Adolf Hitler and German National Socialism in the 1930s succeeded, in part, because of Christianity's failure to comprehend it, Christianity's failure in *having a language for it*. In the light of the Nazi experience, the Christian Church slowly, but too late, began to 'join the dots': namely that German National Socialism, was demonic, a force, a power, which had slipped beyond the power of democratic societies, indeed, everyone. If they had been reading the Gospel of Mark with greater care and insight, they would have woken up.

This question of *seeing with depth* is an inherently spiritual one, for it is about discerning spirits, asking fundamental questions that concern life and death, posing the question, how we are to live in God's world in modern times, how are we to interpret the signs of our times?

Next week, we develop this theme further as we continue to read Mark.