

Pentecost 19B, September 30th, 2018

Readings: Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29, Psalm 124, James 5:13-20, Mark 9:38-50

Crucifying our Own Narcissism

Introduction

These last two weeks, our Gospel readings from Mark have focused upon the cross: the most basic and compelling symbol of Christian theology. So far, we have affirmed the traditional view that the cross first and foremost speaks to us of the generosity of God, the death of God for us, overcoming the power of death, so that we may live: the classic theology of personal salvation. But we also concluded that the cross means more, the cross reveals something about *us*: about human beings, about society and history. We said, last week that the cross, reveals, unmasks an ugly reality: that the world is a veil of tears made up of crucifiers and crucified, hangmen and victims. The cross does not allow us to naively believe that the world is a benign place: it is not! In the light of this ugly reality, we also said that the cross is God's plea that that this veil of tears end, that there be no more crucifiers, nor crucified, that there be no more hangmen nor victims. The cross, we said last week, is God's plea that we do our best to "bring people down from their crosses".

That said, the cross not only unmasks reality for what it is, but also sheds light upon what goes on inside us: our psychology, our spirituality. That is what I want to deal with today- the interior question.

Let's begin with the film clip from *Call the Midwife*! Then turn to the Gospel reading, and finally draw some conclusions.

Film Clip: Call the Midwife - Rivalry and Scandal

In the scene, we see the brewing conflict between two 'strong' women, two people who are accustomed to being seen as the leaders, powerbrokers. Sr. Evangelina, an Anglican nun and midwife, of long-standing is being encroached upon by Nurse Phyllis Crane - a recent arrival - who is, to say the least, "assertive". In this clip, we see numerous cases of rivalry between them: in particular the use of the new-fangled rolodex technology, where patients could be efficiently filed; and then the time-tabling of the staff: when and where the nurses would be working during the day. Each woman exposes the insecurity and anxiety *in* the other; each woman challenges the narcissistic tendencies *of* the other. The mutual rivalry progressively escalates, each scandalizing the other, so that victory can only be had with the other's defeat, the other's demise. In the beginning, the community is bemused, entertained, but over time the concern grows. They can see where this is heading; and it ain't good.

The Gospel of Mark

Let's now turn to the Gospel, to see what the reading reveals to us *about* the human condition and what the cross in Mark's thought, means *for* the human condition. We need to read this at two levels: first, the story itself, and second, the story set in the context of the Christian communities 50 years after Jesus' death.

At face value, the story is about the disciples and an unnamed competitor, an outsider, not of their group, casting out demons in Jesus' name. The sense you get in this story, is that the problem has as much to do with the disciples' sense of failure in the enterprise, since we hear a little earlier that they actually have no success at all in their attempts to free people from their suffering, from their oppression, while this outsider does. In other words, like Sr Evangelina and Nurse Crane, this is all about *rivalry*, where the disciples feel scandalized, furious that their brand has been stolen.

Jesus' response on the other hand is really interesting: "whoever is not against us is for us". In other words, Jesus is not interested in monopolization of the kingdom, Jesus is more concerned about what is done, than that the 'in-group' alone, do it. But there is something else here as well that is often not picked up: namely the capacity of the disciples to use anything, absolutely anything – as good as it may be – as a tool, as a means to power. Think about it! The inherent goodness, the fundamental wholeness of confronting the evil of demons – the injustice under which whole peoples are forced to live – is turned into a cause for self, or group entitlement, for selective benefit. The psychology, the 'spirituality' of these disciples is deeply disturbing, but also complicated. Are they not doing good? Should they not enjoy a little reward, recognition for their trouble, for their commitment to the kingdom? González Faus, to whom I referred earlier in our approach to the readings, sums this up well, when he says this: *"No-one would abandon following Jesus for an option directly contrary to what he stands for. No-one ever arrives at evil directly. Rather, it is always via a subtle process, complex, full of rationalizations, that appear on its face, acceptable"*.

Turning to the situation 50 years later, things have changed. Churches have grown up around Asia Minor, but not without rivalry between them. The Church of Jerusalem is the 'king-pin', the one that likes to call the shots. Holding the status and the power that goes with it, it is naturally more conservative and purist, drawing sharp distinctions between insiders and outsiders, orthodox theology and more liberal theologies. On the other hand, the Galilean church is more open, less traditionalist. As they read this text, they see themselves as the "little ones who believe", (this was how they may have been referred to disparagingly by the Jerusalem Church), and they hear Jesus' dramatic openness and acceptance as encouragement. They *were the outsiders* much like the unnamed man, who did the work of exorcising demons, working for justice, and believe it or not, of whom Jesus approves.

Conclusions

What can we conclude then for what we have said?

First, that we humans not only crucify each other, but we equally, find it in ourselves to rationalize, mask-over our rivalry, using faith systems, ideologies and principles to do so. What of the theology of the "inviolability of the confessional" as a tool for covering sexual abuse of priests? What of the ideology of free market economics for covering over anything but a free market when it comes to financial institutions and the resultant abuse of people?

Second, that the cross, holds us accountable, challenges us, crucifies our perverse psychology and self-serving spiritualities. The cross unmasks our lies with the question: "who really stands to benefit"? The cross demands a sincere and even brutal lucidness and clarity with regard to what we are thinking and doing.

For Sr Evangelina and Nurse Crane, it is the cross and only the cross that can expose their narcissistic games for what they are.