

Sunday, November 17th, 2019, Twenty Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

Readings: Isaiah 65:17-25, Psalm 98, 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13, Luke 21:5-19

The Ambiguity of Religious Language

Introduction

“The shoe is a sign that we must gather shoes together in abundance” “Cast off the shoes, follow the gourd”!

Language is complicated, religious language, even more so, because it reaches out beyond the tangible, the concrete, to dimensions that in themselves are unclear, ethereal, sublime. Another aspect to religious language is the use of symbols. We use symbols as a way of pointing to what we are striving to say – the altar represents the resurrected Christ, the crucifix, the one who was crucified – to name just two. But symbols, while carrying meaning, often carry numerous meanings. The Swiss psychologist, Carl Jung – quite a theologian in his own right – said at one time, that “a symbol is an indefinite expression with multiple meanings, pointing to something not easily defined” and therefore a little unknown. How right he was. What does the shoe mean? What does the gourd evoke? What are the new found followers of Brian attempting to say?

As if it were all too hard, modern Western thought has all but relegated religious or faith language to the realm of meaningless-ness. The British philosopher, who I have referred to at other times here, AJ Ayer, who wrote a renowned book “Language, Truth and Logic” reflected this current broad sense of western secular thought, when he argued that for a statement to hold meaning, it must be verifiable through the senses, confirmable from observation. Religious language was apparently neither of these, and could justifiably, he contended, be viewed as senseless. But not everyone agrees. The Austrian thinker Ludwig Wittgenstein – who was in the same primary class as Adolf Hitler – an altogether more sensitive soul, was a little more sympathetic to religion and religious awareness, when he talked about “language games”, arguing that each game has its own rules and that faith is a language game in its own right, carrying validity and meaning for the believer. But then, Wittgenstein was in a minority.

So, we are left with a foggy picture. But what can be said is this: that at the very least, people of faith like you and me, are in no doubt that religious and faith language *is* meaningful. But more so, we know, do we not from observation of the world around us, that religious language carries enormous weight, extraordinary power – the Middle East conflicts, the same-sex marriage debate, the freedom of religion argument – all point to the fact that religious language influences, shapes, not only individuals, but whole societies – suggesting to us, that it can be a force, a power for good or otherwise – bad. Religious language can be creative or destructive.

The Gospel

And so, to the Gospel for today, which centres upon religious language, a particular type of faith language: language called apocalyptic.

In this reading, the Hebrew crowd comment upon the architectural beauty of the Jerusalem Temple: and beautiful it was. Notwithstanding, Jesus takes them beyond mere aesthetics, and points out that it does not have long to survive. As people who are well aware of the violence of the times – between competing Jewish interests and also those of Rome and Jerusalem – they automatically assume that he, Jesus, is speaking of the end times, of God’s violent entrée into history, where God’s enemies, *and theirs*, will be dealt with by a sweep of the divine hand. While the Temple might be destroyed, so will the enemies of God. The Hebrew crowd subscribe to a language of sacrifice, a sacrificial theology... of their opponents, of their antagonists, of their enemies.

Now, the response is really interesting: Jesus totally retreats, backs away from, their language, which connects God and violence, the divine and destructiveness. In fact, what Jesus does, is extraordinary. He points out that violence goes on all the time. He indicates that to look for a divine sign, a religious symbol in violence, is deluded. He explains that it is human conflict in history that generates violence, not God’s desire for it. Violence and sacrifice are human things, an anthropological reality, not a divine one.

So, Jesus, here, is debunking the legitimacy of violent religious and faith language altogether; although true to form, he comments when turning to his followers that *they themselves*, as a faith minority, will in all probability become victims of violence: for that is the way of the world, and of religious language, when it has lost its way.

Conclusion: And So?

Religious language *has meaning, carries weight, can be a real power for good or bad*. Religious language can incite, or can serve altogether more worthy ends, religious language can provoke the sacrifice of others or promote a more merit-able humanist vision for society. Let’s be clear: words can kill, words can destroy, as well as give life: especially religious words!

