

Pentecost 6C, Sunday, July 21st, 2019

Readings: Amos 8:1-12, Psalm 52, Colossians 1:15-28, Luke 10:38-42

Rivalry

Introduction

What is it that stands front and centre of the relationship between the Roman emperor, Marcus Aurelius and his eldest son Commodus? In the dialogue moments prior to Commodus' murder of his father, Commodus refers to the several virtues that Marcus Aurelius had listed as necessary for leadership: they are in fact the virtues of the philosophical school of Stoicism, of which the emperor had been a leading exponent. Commodus, then lists his own virtues, protesting that, despite his father's decision not to nominate him as his successor, that he, nevertheless is up to the job. What we see in this scene is a relationship of rivalry; at least on Commodus' part. It is the rivalry which spells disaster for both men: Aurelius loses his life *now*, while Commodus loses his *later*.

This question of rivalry is utterly central to any understanding of the human being and of human society: and it is not just classical thought – of the Greeks and Romans – that tells us this. If we return to Scripture, to the world of the Hebrews, we find the same insight with the primordial murder of Biblical history – Cain's assassination of his brother Abel, due to rivalry and envy (Genesis 4:1-18). But we can also move well beyond, the classical and Hebrew traditions, to acknowledge the place of rivalry in modern and contemporary history: The famous English painters, Constable and Turner, sculptors, Raphael and Michelangelo, the mathematicians, Newton and Leibniz, and by no means least, the philosopher and theologian, Hegel and Schleiermacher, mentioned on the front page of our liturgy. But there are also the cultural rivalries. One of the most bizarre, which may be new to you, was the so-called "Football War, between the Central American republics of El Salvador and Honduras, in 1969, triggered by all things, a football match. What to do with those 'hot' Latins...right Gilda? ☺

Let's ask two questions: first, what is the psychology of rivalry? Second, what is the Christian theology of rivalry?

Psychology

Carl Jung, the famous German psychologist who once wrote a fascinating commentary on the Book of Job, makes some incisive points. He tells us that rivalry occurs only between like people. A professional middle-class Australian will not be rivalrous with an indigenous Brazilian from the Amazon, but he will be rivalrous with someone who is like him, who is probably quite close to him: another professional middle-class Australian, who moves in the same circles and has similar aspirations. Another thing that Jung tells us, is that the qualities in our rival, that arouse our hostility, are precisely those that we reject in our own make-up: for example, aggression, greed, lust, rudeness, to name a few: what he calls our "shadow-selves". Finally, Jung tells us that, we project that shadow-self onto others, attributing to them those characteristics which we reject in ourselves. When we hate someone, we hate something in them, that is latently part of us.

The Theology of Rivalry

Let's turn to the Gospel reading for today. The story of Mary and Martha is by no means a treatise on human rivalry...Christian theology is much broader and deeper than this story. Nevertheless, the story does give us a way into the issue. I make three points:

First, that this story has often been taken to be about the priority of the life of contemplation, the spiritual life, over the life of action, of doing: Mary's option to sit at Jesus's feet is better than Martha's busy-ness. That certainly *was* the interpretation of medieval Christianity at the time of the rise of the monastic movements, and it has persisted over the centuries: remember the words:

“Mary has chosen the better”, put well in the translation as “main course”. But that interpretation stretches this story a bit too much.

Second, read carefully, Jesus’ criticism of Martha has nothing to do with her busy-ness, but rather with her manner with Mary, her ‘lording it’ over Mary, her rivalry with Mary. To use Jung, Martha’s shadow-self gets the upper hand, the things she rejects in her own make-up, things that she feels uncomfortable with, unconfident about: reflecting, thinking, listening, she projects onto Mary as unacceptable. In her rivalry, Martha insists that Mary does what *she* is doing. The words are strong: we are told that Martha was so overwhelmed, so panicked, literally “in spasm” (*perispao*) that she stands-over Jesus (*ephistemi*), **ordering him, to order Mary**, to help-out in the preparation. You can imagine the tension.

Finally, Jesus’ defence of Mary, is not about asserting the better way of contemplation over action, but saying that both are legitimate, both are necessary.

Conclusion

What then may we conclude? In my years of work with Christians and Christian organizations across a range of cultures, what has struck me, sadly, is the extraordinary lack of insight that Christians have in regard to *themselves*, and that Christian organizations have in relation to *themselves* – perhaps I have seen too much.

This story of Mary and Martha, invites us to become aware of what is going on inside of *me*. This story, asks *me* to be self-critical, to be insightful about what makes *me* tick, what *my* real motives are. The Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola written centuries ago (1548), are really exercises in psychology for the Christian, exercises so that Christians may come to understanding themselves, uncovering all those motives within that are unworthy, destructive, manipulative and rivalrous. One Spanish theologian put it this way in his comments upon the Christian life: “What matters most, what is most effective in the long run” he says “is brutal sincerity and lucidness about oneself. This is far better than deceitful innocence” which does no more than to project onto others, our own shadow, our own insecurities.