

Pentecost 7C, Sunday, July 28th, 2019

Readings: Genesis 18:20-32, Psalm 85, Colossians 2:6-15 (16-19), Luke 11:1-13

Rethinking Things

Introduction

In 1994, the Anglican Church in England first ordained women priests. It was a shock 'to the system' as a whole. Some dioceses and parishes recognized the new practice, and new doctrine behind it, some refused. In our clip (Vicar of Dibley: Episode 1: The Arrival), the parish of Dibley is struggling. We witness the initial astonishment, as Geraldine Grainger shows up to meet the members of Parish Council, and David Horton, the Chairperson, signals his displeasure with a phone call to the bishop. So, what is the reason for the response? In large part, it is about resistance to change: the inherent idea being that the 'things of God' remain eternal, immutable, rigid. As David Horton says, "If Jesus wanted women to spread the gospel, he would have appointed them. It's Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, not Sharon, Tracey, Tara and Debbie" (15:10)

The insight of this episode is two-fold: first, that change is inescapable – we live with it every day, in fact we expect it, we depend upon it. But, second, when it comes to the big questions of life, in particular faith, we are reluctant, truculent about change. After all, we are not talking about new technology – a new iPhone – but *ultimate things*, things that involve passion: things that are thought through with what the French philosopher Blaise Pascal called *reason of the heart*.

Let's have a look at our two readings for the day, for within them, we actually see changing thought, changing perception, through reason of the heart about the most ultimate of things: God.

The Hebrew Bible: The Story of Sodom and Gomorrah

The Hebrew story before us concerns those infamous cities of Sodom and Gomorrah; and it goes like this. God decides to go down to the cities to check out the stories about the behaviour of its citizens. The very name Sodom and Gomorrah suggests to us sexual licentiousness. While that is not the only problem with the people's behaviour – it actually has more to do with the violent refusal of hospitality to foreigners, outsiders – the story soon turns upon the problem *with God's behaviour: the problem of God*. How so? Well, the issue is this: while the people's behaviour is disturbing, God's seems no better, as God threatens to commit the crime of mass murder as a 'fit and right' punishment upon them. What stands out in the account, is the way in which Abraham serves as a check upon God's excesses. "What about the innocent in the cities? How many innocent people would I need to show you, how many would it take for you to desist, to back away from your course of action?" Abraham barter God down: fifty, forty-five, forty, thirty, twenty or ten. Some scholars try to give as 'sunny an interpretation as possible' about this: that God is not so bad, because he does not argue the point with Abraham. But I am not sure that is the main concern here. Rather, the problem is that God's generosity (what we call "grace") is muted, blunted, muffled, twisted, within a rules-based, punitive divine view of things. In fact, in the next chapter, we read that Sodom and Gomorrah *are* ultimately destroyed: presumably because God's punitive rules prevailed over generosity. The perception is this: when 'push comes to shove', God's law, God's rule-based system overwhelms, overpowers grace. God's grace, God's generosity runs a very poor second.

The Lord's Prayer

When we move to the New Testament there is a sea-change: Jesus understands God very differently to the view in the book of Genesis. In place of God, whose generosity is conditioned by the threat of punishment, Jesus represents the very opposite: there is nothing to fear, there is no threat hanging over human beings. God is no tyrant, keeping records 'in the clouds above', as

John Shelby Spong put it, but rather *abba*, daddy: the endearing Aramaic word a young child would use, and still uses today for her father.

When we get *this*: then we get the Lord's Prayer: The Lord's Prayer is *all* about, and *only* about a new order of things moved by God's overwhelming, undiluted generosity. It is a prayer which is not just personal but also social. It is a prayer grounded in the value of public forgiveness, letting go (*aphiemi*), the Hebrew idea of Jubilee (Leviticus 25:8-55): the cancellation of financial debts (forgive us our debts - *opheilema*); the liberation of slaves (economies functioned on the back of them as they do today - today we call "indentured labour") and the redistribution of capital concentrated in the hands of a few, broadened to the majorities. The Lord's Prayer effectively says this: because you are forgiven (freed), then forgive (free). Because you are forgiven (freed), allow that forgiveness (freedom), to shape not just your personal relations but your social and economic vision for the community and the world.

Can you see then, how change in faith understanding has occurred in the journey from Sodom and Gomorrah to Jesus' Prayer, from Genesis to Luke? There has been a rethinking of things, a transformation as clear as day is from night: The changed perception, the changed doctrine, is that God's generosity no longer lives compromised by the shadow of threat, always ready to pounce. Rather, God's generosity is broad and deep, constant and reliable, freeing us to live generously, *always* generously: in both the private and public domains: That is the Gospel!

Back to Living

In 1994, I was asked by a gay couple, members of my congregation in Redfern-Waterloo, to celebrate their union of 25 years: a union of loyalty and fidelity. It was a controversial request which at that time challenged the norm. The Church at that time had no official way of recognizing such relationships of long-term standing. After considerable thought, I did so; aware of the risks I was taking when it came to issues of church order. Within days, the Moderator rang me having heard of the event through the grape-vine. I explained my actions to her: that it was an expression of the Church's doctrine of generosity, acknowledging this couple's loyalty and fidelity to each other, moving beyond the rule book as it were, using "the reason of the heart". Was I correct in my judgement or did I err?

