

Sunday, July 12th, 2020

Pentecost 6A

Genesis 25:19-34, Psalm 119: 105-112, Romans 8:1-11, Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Generosity as Attention

Introduction

“Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity”.

The Rev'd Appleby Thornton arrives at Nonnatus House in order to offer his services as chaplain to the community. At his own admission, he is a person who is seldom quiet, because as a child, he would witness the silent hatred between his parents, over the dinner table. “I talk”, he says, “so I won't know what the silence holds”. At Nonnatus House, in the East End he meets another wounded soul; Jane who has come to work as an assistant...an *assistant everything*. Jane was raised within an institution. Withdrawn, your sense is that she is so fragile that she will fall apart like a worn piece of delicate china. She finds in the woundedness of Appleby Thornton, a like soul, and quite possibly for the first time in her life, she opens up, she explains herself...to him. “I have always been scared...as long as I can remember”. He had invited her to the community dance only hours before, to which her response had been “Why me”? Now, she explains herself and her earlier curious reaction, saying, “I really wanted to come to the dance with you. I was too scared. I still struggle”.

Within this electric, compelling scene, you discover that Jane is opening up, only because Appleby Thornton has paid her attention, has generously, and painfully offered something of his troubled history, something of himself.

“Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity”.

And so, to the readings!

Readings

As we assimilate the two stories: the first, the Hebrew story of the birth of Esau and Jacob, and Matthew's story of the seeds; there is a sense that they are connected, but *in reverse*, in an inverted way. The story of Esau and Jacob is the story of rivalry. Here in one reading, we have the entire history of humanity, a penetrating rendering of the human condition. It begins at the moment of birth, for the younger son emerges while tightly grasping his older brother's heel, as if he were trying to get ahead of him. As if to make the point inescapable for the Hebrew reader, the very name of the competitive younger son, Jacob, contains a play on words, for it includes the idea of “heel” within it. What begins problematically only gets worse exacerbated by the favouritism of the respective parents: Isaac favouring the “out-doorsy” man's man, Esau, while Rebekah favours the “girlie-man” Jacob, who hangs around the kitchen with the women. But wait, we haven't finished yet...there is more...and this is the most disturbing factor in the whole sordid story: God himself adds fuel to the fire, through inexplicably, bizarrely, enigmatically, favouring Jacob. Within this narrative, there is no visible justification for the divine partiality, which only increases the bad blood. And all this, achieved through lies and manipulation, for it is Jacob, who in league with his mother, conspires to steal the birthright from Esau. No-one comes out of this well. Not even God! If we could say anything positive about this, it is this: there is a sense of realism about it. This is how people are and this is the raw material God has to use.

In the Gospel reading, something else is happening. Instead of contention and complicity in the rivalrous drive for advantage – human and divine – there is radical disinterested generosity. Most of the time this parable has been interpreted, and rightly so, in terms of the differing responses that the Gospel garners, depending in large part upon the recipients. Matthew's Christian community had to come to terms with the fact that some hear and others don't. Some understand and others don't. Some respond meaningfully and others don't. It is always a mystery, not least, today, where currently Christianity is out of favour in the developed West, but increasingly embraced in the East, in particular China. But behind this story there is a beginning point: *God's attention to the world, God's extraordinary, radical generosity in the world*. The Sower allows himself to be struck by the need of the situation; who flings seed everywhere, wastes it with holy abandon, feeding the birds, whistling at the rocks, and picking his way through the thorns.

Attention and Generosity

This was the perception of the French Jewish mystic and political activist Simone Weil. Born in 1909 into a secular family, and raised in complete agnosticism, Weil was brilliant, beating the French feminist, Simone de Beauvoir to first place in the exams of the *École Normale Supérieure*, among the prominent universities of Paris. She also held her own in debate with the Bolshevik, Leon Trotsky, when he visited her parents in their Paris apartment, insisting that communist bureaucrats were no different to capitalist ones. Weil was drawn to Christian faith, noting that what stands at its heart is the God of *attention*, the, *generous God, expressed through Jesus*. Weil understands attention as not a question of will power, as suggested in the order "pay attention", but rather about receptivity, openness, allowing our minds and hearts to be penetrated, breached, moved by the other, the capacity to receive the other as gift.

Weil says this:

Those who are unhappy have no need for anything in this world apart from one who is capable of giving them their attention. The capacity to give one's attention to a sufferer is a very rare and difficult thing; it is almost a miracle; it is a miracle...The love of neighbour in all its fullness, simply means being able to say to him: 'What are you going through?'"

This was the question that Jane heard through Appleby-Thornton's attention. The question 'What are you going through'?...that ultimately saved her.