

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

16th June 2013

1 Kings 21: 1-15, Psalm 5: 1-7, Galatians 2:15-21, Luke 7:36-8:3

Before we can approach or even appreciate the enlightenment that Paul speaks of in the second reading from Galatians, we should explore our understanding and perhaps also our confusion when we look at, and compare, the first reading and the gospel reading.

The first reading provides us with a narrative that tells us about the ‘evil’ deeds of King Ahab and his wife Jezebel. We could almost make it into one of those Victorian pantomimes with the audience booing each time Ahab or Jezebel comes onto the stage. There is, at one level, an obvious reading that tells us that Ahab was evil in his dealings with Naboth, and so was judged and punished by God; *“Because you have sold yourself to do what is evil in the sight of the LORD, 21 I will bring disaster on you; I will consume you, and will cut off from Ahab every male, bond or free, in Israel.”*

Now the gospel reading has another story of another sinner, *“a woman of the city”*; however, in this story she receives Divine forgiveness through Jesus. It is little wonder that we have some confusion between ‘sin’, ‘judgement’, ‘punishment’ and ‘forgiveness’. And as we explore that confusion we are left wondering; does God judge and punish, or does God judge and forgive?

Some ‘teachers’ have provided a simplistic rationalisation as an answer to the dilemma by describing a difference between the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament, as revealed in, and through Christ. But that solution is creative of further confusion as we try and hold on to the theology of there being only one God, and an unchanging God as well. One approach to the dilemma, and in fact an appropriate process for all biblical reflection, is to bring our life experience into the picture. We have all encountered in life those moments when we question our understanding of God; and in the context of today’s dilemma we’ve probably, at some time or other, held the question *“Why do bad things happen to good people?”*

If we follow the threads of that question we will eventually appreciate that the whole idea of a God judging, controlling, punishing and/or forgiving is a path that leads only to a self-righteous religion. And we have to acknowledge that most religions have established a righteous and an un-righteous code of behaviour that is promoted as God’s Divine attitude toward us. One of the primary misunderstandings or misrepresentations of scripture, faith, theology and religious practice is that they are about me and God, or my relationship with God. That misunderstanding permeates Western Christianity through the notion of ‘salvation’, and permeates, in a similar way, the Eastern traditions with the notion of Karma. And yet, our very life experience tells us that we can do bad things and get away with it, and likewise do good things and receive only suffering.

That common misrepresentation, misunderstanding is corrected when we more fully appreciate that salvation and karma, the very activity of God in creation, is never in relation to me (alone), but always in relation to me-as-part-of-the-whole. And that shift in understanding changes our appreciation of the bible and enables us to find a deeper truth that echoes and has integrity with our actual life experience. Another insight that corrects so much misunderstanding is to fully appreciate that God is gift, **and** giver, of Life. God ‘gives’ God-

self into the creation of life, withholding nothing. And that includes judgement and forgiveness, these are also fully given into the life of creation.

Now, what we see in the two narratives we're looking at this morning is the outworking of Divinity in humanity. Ahab chooses to ignore the Divine, or turn away from that which is his richest gift. He chooses only for himself and in so doing creates an enmity within himself; "*Ahab said to Elijah, "Have you found me, O my enemy?"*" It is an orientation that leads only to death. Ahab's greed and desire for possessions is an orientation to his grave. And if we read through the narrative in light of that understanding we see also that the desire to hold on to possessions was also the path that Naboth chose for himself, and that path also led to death.

Now when we look at the gospel narrative, we see that the woman at Jesus feet provides us with an example of someone, and a sinner, with an orientation to the Divine; for she embodies the Divine activity of 'giving'. She has a knowing of her sinfulness, but not a wallowing in it; rather she chooses an active movement toward honouring, or giving to, the Divine.

When we bring the two stories together, so too we might contemplate the coming together of our different energies - the 'King' and the 'woman of the city', rich and poor, male and female - these energies, or orientations, like 'good' and 'bad' run through us all, they are the forces within that we must choose to align our lives with. And what we see revealed in Christ is that the same is true, for the orientation of human and divine, they are life energies, or orientations, that permeate our very being.

We are not judged by God

We are not saved by God

We are not punished by God

We are not forgiven by God

For God has given, Love the gift of life is fully given, God has not withheld anything.

The destination of life is ours to be chosen and realised. We can move toward death, or we can move toward life. We can have an orientation toward self or an orientation toward all (and our part in that all). We can feed our desire for getting or giving. We can align with Ahab and Naboth or with the woman in the city.

Paul has this insight, and he speaks of it the Galatians reading today:

it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.

And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

Today's readings are about our life orientation, and they offer us, or encourage us to be "in Christ".

Peter Humphris