

6 July 2014 Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

Genesis 24:34-67

Psalm 45: 10-17

Romans 7: 15-25

Matthew 11:15-30

In the reading from Romans the echoes of sin and law, the sin of the flesh and the evil that makes us captive to the law of sin, provide some fertile ground for one of those old fashioned sermons that places the good book, the rules of life over the wretchedness of ourselves (humanity).

In reading Romans, we witness Paul's wrestling; the proto-Christian wrestling with himself and seeking to realise that which is revealed through Christ, seeking to be fully alive to the glory of God; and the cry that comes out of Paul's struggle is "*Who will rescue me from this body of death?*"

Perhaps we can only really appreciate Paul's wrestling when we ourselves engage the same, and that's a relatively rare in the modern world. Looking around suburban Perth we don't seem to see many people wrestling like Paul, we don't come across too many seeking freedom from their own "body of death".

So perhaps it is not a common practice, and fair to say also that the "body of death" is not a particularly common self-image; and yet there are echoes and parallels of Paul's insight in the contemporary world and in the everyday of each and every life.

Before exploring the reading further, it might be helpful to deal with and then dismiss the first reading.

We read the story of Abraham's servant who is charged with finding a wife for Isaac, Abraham's son.

What purpose does this story serve?

When we hear it, are we listening to the 'Word of God' in the same way that we are when listening to Paul's letter to the Romans?

It is helpful for us to aware and discerning when we read from the bible; for it is a library of many different books and each is written from a different perspective and for a different purpose, so they each deserve to be read and heard differently.

The book of Genesis is a deliberately constructed narrative to provide a dramatic historical appreciation of who we are; and the 'who' being the Hebrew people. It has been constructed to underline the belief system of the Hebrew people from a perspective set in the time and place that it was written.

It is designed to affirm the power of God, the place of the Hebrew people as God's chosen race and also the continuity of Israel's status from the very beginning of time.

Genesis is not a recorded transcript of history; rather it is a deliberate construction of history that serves the purpose of providing the people of Israel with a common understanding and appreciation of identity and a common affirmation of their faith.

This constructed version of history is quite clearly evidenced by the camels in the story;

Genesis 24 was most likely written more than 1400 years after Abraham's time; and although camels were common at the time of writing Genesis, in Abraham's time, 1400 years earlier, they were not yet domesticated.

The writer also needs to underline the very power of God, and so the story needs to have 'extraordinary' elements.

Abraham's servant therefore asks asks for a very unlikely sign, as we read in verse 43

"I am standing here by the spring of water; let the young woman who comes out to draw, to whom I shall say, "Please give me a little water from your jar to drink," 44 and who will say to me, "Drink, and I will draw for your camels also" --let her be the woman whom the LORD has appointed for my master's son."

Some of the extra ordinary-ness is lost on us until we appreciate that Abraham's servant had ten camels; and after a long journey a camel can drink more than fifty gallons of water. So what 'young woman' would offer, or be capable, to draw 500 gallons of water for a stranger?

Having looked at this first reading we can very much leave it for those in the Hebrew tradition, it is a very Jewish story; and their fundamentalists can read it as a proof text of their faith, and their more liberal members can appreciate and affirm the continuity that is inherent in the story.

Now, back to the second reading from Romans; it is a very different text for it is a letter, or a sermon, that seeks to give others an appreciation of what Paul (and those in his circle of enlightenment) understands; it seeks to give an impression of Paul's encounter with Christ, Christ's teaching and all that was revealed in his life.

Paul was someone well-grounded in his religious tradition, the same tradition that was underlined in the first reading, however we read in his letter that Paul has seen beyond that tradition; he has a new understanding, a new worldview and a vision that goes way beyond the confines of that first reading worldview.

Paul sees that Christ calls into question the very understanding of "God's chosen people", he offers *"a new way, a living way through the curtain, through his own body"*[Hebrews 10:20]. It is this new vision that Paul wrestles with; he wrestles with being alive in Christ, with the very reality of his own, and our own, Christ-likeness.

To be fully alive to the glory of God asks of Paul that he be free from himself, free from his "body of death".

Paul's enlightenment, his seeing and being 'In Christ', enables him to see himself from a different place. When he was safe in his Pharisaic tradition, all seemed to be ok; he followed the law and that was all that was required. Now he sees beyond that self-righteous view, he sees that 'in Christ', or following Christ, he is called to be a member of Christ's body. All that is 'of Christ' is also 'of Paul' and so too is of each and all of us.

Paul's insight calls into question his life orientation, his everyday being; and he comments of himself: *"I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate."*

Paul has become aware and awake to the fact that his deepest desire, his true integrity is not that which is reflected in his actions. Paul is sharing of himself and offering his enlightenment to those who also seek to become and to be in full integrity with their divine truth.

In the gospel reading Paul's wrestling is given a community perspective through the opening question: *"to what will I compare this generation"*; it is a question that invites us into a broader awareness of our blindness, our being unaware of God.

As we move beyond the self-giving of Easter, and beyond the Spirit-giving of Pentecost, into the green season of growth we might ponder the two questions raised today: *"Who will rescue me from this body of death?"* and *"to what will I compare this generation"?*

We could then share our self-reflections through our circles of giving.

Paul provides the circle of giving in Rome with a reflection of his struggle; he is not dictating answers rather he is sharing his struggle.

Paul shares his deepest insights, his wrestling, and he shares his unrealised passion; and it is in the process of sharing that perhaps he finds for himself an integrity with all that he speaks.

In our culture we are warned off sharing three particular topics, we are not supposed to talk about sex, religion or politics; do you ever wonder why these are off limits?

It could be fear of division, it could be the embarrassment of disclosure, it could be a desire to be liked and acceptable, and so fear of rocking the boat...

More likely it is a fear that will expose ourselves as being out of integrity with our truest being, a fear that others will see that we *"do not understand our[my] own actions"*.

Paul serves as an example, and an invitation to share our struggle, to share the wrestling with our faith and in that sharing, in our self-giving, so to be rescued from our "body of death" and so birthed into the eternity of Divine truth.

Peter Humphris