

Seventh Sunday 27 July 2014

Genesis 29:15-28

Psalms 105:1-11

Romans 8: 26-39

Matthew 13:44-58



All three readings today provide us with an opportunity to consider the unfolding nature of life and so too our unfolding theology.

So this is also an opportunity for us to become aware of the forces that shape us, and of the forces that we employ to give shape to our future and so to the future of life for all.

The first reading appears, like a Shakespearean play to be a tale of love and deceit; it's like a tragic farce with a final triumph of sorts...

It does actually serve a particular purpose in the Hebrew tradition to which it rightly belongs; and we can glimpse some of its purposeful sense when we remember that Jacob 'stole' Esau's birthright: the younger took from the elder. And so Laban's deceit by putting the elder before the younger is, in the context of the drama, a rebalancing of past wrongs.

Leaving aside the drama of the Hebrew tradition, in a contemporary context we are left with some distasteful aspects of the story itself:

1. The powerlessness of the daughters
2. The deceiving use of power by Laban
3. Jacob's blindness as to whom he is sleeping with.
4. The acceptance of multiple wives.
5. The ownership issue implicit in the purchasing of a bride.

Of course we will appreciate that the world has changed and these things, and this story, could no longer be a story written in today's world.

Certainly that is true for most of our Australian world, but still not true for the whole world. However rather than debating the rights and wrongs of these issues, there is a universal value in considering the process of changing worldviews.

We should remember that at the time of writing, the dynamics of the Jacob-Rachael love story were well within the acceptable norms of the day.

So, between then and now what changed, and when and how were those changes achieved?

The changes in these very different worldviews, then and now, did not come through teaching, for schools and universities support and teach within the norms of the time. The changes did not come through religious institutions, for they also hold, often quite desperately to the traditions of the day or even of the past.

And the changes were not brought about through governments for they have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo, seeing any change as a risk that can result in votes also changing.

So if governments, religious institutions and our educational systems are not responsible, how is change accomplished?

What changes the worldviews that provide such different acceptable norms for the different love stories of Jacob and Rachael/Leah, Romeo and Juliet, and Peter Fraser and Gordon Stevenson, the first same-sex couple to marry in Australia?

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How, who, in what way, and when are the dynamics of change brought into being?

It is a good question for us to ponder for 'change' is perhaps one of the major dynamics that underlines and underpins our faith.

So keeping this question in mind, let's look briefly at the other two readings.

In the second reading we encounter Paul's worldview, a different, but not very different, worldview from the writer of Genesis.

Paul's appreciation of the dynamic of life and of life's unfolding (the dynamic of change) is evident as he explores and expounds his understanding of God. That alone gives us a clue to wrestling with the question we are holding.

In verse 28 Paul says: "*We know that all things work together for good for those who love God*"

And those who love God are, those "who are called according to God's [his] purpose.

Paul then goes on to further describe this dynamic of 'purpose'; "*For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. 30 And those whom he predestined he also called*"

Let's leave aside any debate about the exclusive nature that Paul implies with God's picking and choosing particular individuals, and for the question we are holding consider the whole notion of 'predestination'.

How, who, in what way, and when are the dynamics of change brought into being?

Predestination conceptualises the world as already unfolded in the mind of God; and we are but players in various acts and scenes of a drama that is already scripted.

It is an understandable worldview in that it gives a simple way of appreciating how we experience many of the changes that we encounter.

It also holds a hidden flaw, for within a worldview of 'predestination' we have an almost unconscious conclusion that enables us to say "why bother, there's nothing I can do about it". Similarly we will also encounter some theological conundrums, for if God is fully in control and already knows tomorrow then what is the point of the whole Jesus narrative?

We can see that Paul's worldview leaks into his understanding and appreciation of God, and so too provides the lens through which he sees all that was revealed in, and through, Christ.

The gospel reading from Matthew provides us with some of the teachings of Jesus, and although presented in parable form they give an appreciation of another worldview. This time it has an eschatological framework, and the outworking of change, the sorting out of creative activity will be accomplished "*at the end of the age.*"

Such a worldview leaves us playing our part in a divinely directed drama, however this time our performance will be judged when the play has finished.

3

So let's go back again to our question: How, who, in what way, and when are the dynamics of change brought into being?

The changes in acceptable norms from the time of Jacob and Rachael through to the present were beyond the imagination of the writer of Genesis; and we all know that the momentum of change is seemingly unstoppable.

Matthew and Paul had appreciations of a changing worldview for they both lived in the enlightenment of Christ; however in the present age we continue to question and to seek fuller and deeper appreciations as we also live with the enlightenment that past changes have brought to light.

If we imagine ourselves in the next millennium looking back to this present age, would we see that our acceptable norms today would be hard to understand by the generations of tomorrow; and so realise just how important our question regarding change is?

What if the dynamics of change are very much the fruit and labour of our own hands, and what if our realisation of that truth is the reality of living into our baptism?

Change is the outworking dynamic that is associated with the activity of God. It is a complex but simple insight, glimpsed by Paul but also obscured by his tradition.

God is the creator, God is love and love is the activity of divine creation.

It is the prophetic eye, the eye that sees with Divine insight, that initiates change; and we, the Church seek to nurture the gifts and honour the gifts of prophetic insight.

We see beyond the bread and wine and into the reality of Gift, giver and given.

We see beyond the gospels and into a reality where divine becomes human.

We see beyond the agendas of today's acceptable norms to that which calls all into oneness and holiness.

And we see ourselves as part of the body that gives voice to "I AM making all things new".

The overall 'drift' of today's sermon has been away from the confines of the stories in the text. It is as if we started with a Shakespearean play and ended up looking into the reality of who we are and how we change. That is the essence and the beauty of the Scriptures, and another reality that illuminates that "the word became flesh"...

The word became flesh, and we are the Body of Christ, we are the flesh of the Word's becoming; and so our questions takes a slightly different form with that realisation; now we should be asking of ourselves, what is the New Creation that we will bring to birth...

Peter Humphris