

Fourth Sunday in Lent 6 Mar 2016

Joshua 5: 2-12

Psalm 32

2 Corinthians 5: 16-21

Luke, 11:11-32

Today we are given two very different options that tell us how we might encounter God.

In the Old Testament reading we discover a relatively simple process; "*Make flint knives and circumcise the Israelites at Gibeath-haaraloth.*"

Hopefully most of us can appreciate the primitive understanding and the primitive worldview that established such a practice, and even further that demanded such a practice as a 'God ordained' requirement.

However, it is sobering to acknowledge the reality that for many Christians, most Jews and most Muslims this is still understood as a 'God ordained' requirement.

The travel industry pre-330BCE would only allow travel that did not extend more than about 20Kms off-shore; there was absolutely no overseas travel for fear that clients would fall off the end of the flat earth.

However, as new insights were revealed, and as civilisation evolved, the travel industry changed and opened up new horizons and even extended to reach beyond the horizons of our past imagination.

Today it is possible to book travel packages that will take you into space; and here is part of their advertising;

A seat to space with Virgin Galactic and membership of the Future Astronaut community requires the full price of US\$250,000 to be paid as an up front deposit.

Imagine, if the Church, and if all other religious institutions, were as open to new insights, and imagine if they had the same sense of vision shown by Virgin Galactic(which sounds like a more universal version of our virgin Mary).

Imagine an encounter with God that did not require the questionable use of 'flint knives'.

As an aside there is a real irony in a religion that professes that humanity is made in God's image and that then requires that image be modified (using flint knives) in order to realise its divine nature.

Now, leaving that first option behind let's look at the second option that tells us how we might encounter God; and that's found in the gospel.

In the story of two different sons we hear "*the younger son gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living*"; or in the words of his brother he had devoured his Father's property with prostitutes; and yet it was this same younger son that prompted celebration and rejoicing from the Father; and so another way for us to encounter God, perhaps!

These two examples, again, clearly identify that we need more than a first glance look at the Scriptures if we are to find any wisdom that is relevant to us, and also that we need to be mindful of the gap between Virgin Mary and Virgin Galactic, we need to read, and seek wisdom, with all the insight that has evolved since they were written.

And there are some real insights that take us beyond the horizon of the traditional understanding and teaching of 'the Church' in the readings today.

Joshua's primitive work with 'flint knives' sought to make visible the claim of faith by the Israelites; it is a similar making visible that is found in the Baptism liturgy "*I sign you with the sign of the cross to show that you are marked as Christ's own forever*"

However all such rituals are symbolic of a reality that is to be lived out; they give us a starting point from which we ourselves will make visible all that they represent.

The mark of our baptism is a starting point of our being anointed, our Christ-likeness, and rather than being a circumcision, it is a sign of what we are to become.

Paul, was a circumcised Jew, and well versed in the Jewish tradition; however, the insight revealed to him through Christ gave him a completely new vision.

In his own words we are told in the second reading "*if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new*".

And history shows us that a new creation, a new worldview took hold in the early days of the church, however, like us today, they were held back from realising this new creation by a holding on to the primitive traditions of the past.

Virgin Galactic are offering space tourism that will take us beyond the clouds; and yet the Church is still talking of Heaven above, they are holding onto a primitive, blinkered, worldview that really believed heaven was a place just beyond the clouds.

Paul's new worldview changed his perceptions of God, and so revealed a whole new understanding, both of divine things and of day-to-day affairs and relationships: "*From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way.*"

And this insightfulness is there for us, if we will but look beyond the 'first glance' of the Scriptures and truly scratch the surface of our faith.

Much of our day-to-day reality is shaped by myths that we reinforce unconsciously, and the day-to-day language distorts the divine reality as well as our local ego-centred reality.

I've seen two copies of the West Australian this week, and in both cases sport stories dominated the front page; what is the reality of what is important in our lives?

Our government is afraid of a backlash if revises the pension system; it appears that most of us believe that pensions should be paid out to millionaires, or as we call them today home-owners; we want pensions for ourselves even though we hold more wealth than half the people on the planet.

Are these characteristics of living out our baptism, or like the primitive Israelites do we actually believe that God's promises for a land flowing with milk and honey are only for us Anglicans that have been carved into a church with flint knives.

After an encounter with Christ, Paul changed his whole worldview; he became a participant in the unfolding of creation, rather than living a blinkered life held captive by a primitive

tradition; in reality he encountered another God; even though it was the God of his forebears.

The gospel story very much illuminates these different realities in the lives and attitudes of the two sons, the Good Anglican who does everything right, and the one who goes into the wilderness, into the wild that lies beyond, and it is the son who leaves the father who follows the path of Adam & Eve and steps out as a participant in creations unfolding.

Now we could debate endlessly the rights and the wrongs associated with both brothers, and we could build a case for one or the other to serve as examples, but within the narrative is perhaps an even more important, subtle insight.

In verse 17 the son who has left Eden and gone out into the world has a n experience of Lent;

"But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! 18 I will get up and go to my father'".

And quite rightly we perhaps are seeking that same moment of insightful repentance for ourselves this Lent; but as we continue with the story we hear:

"But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him."

Here Christ has revealed a new reality of God that is of a different order to the God from past and more primitive traditions; this is not the God who resides in heaven, nor the God that judges and punishes, nor the God that fulfils promises; it is not the God that requires flint knife operations, nor sacrifice, nor the atonement of a bloody body on a cross; rather this is a God who runs to embrace us as soon as we turn to have our hunger filled.

This is the God we seek to encounter in our journey into Lent and who is ready to embrace us when we 'come to an awareness of ourselves'.

It is perhaps the most important illustration in the whole story that still bears the title of its 'first glance' reading; this is not so much the story of 'The Prodigal Son', but more correctly the story of a new enlightenment that asks us to look again at ourselves and at our understanding of God.

The Eastern Orthodox Church traditionally reads this story on the Sunday of the Prodigal Son, about two weeks before the beginning of Great Lent. One common *kontakion* hymn of the occasion reads,

*I have recklessly forgotten Your glory, O Father;
And among sinners I have scattered the riches which You gave to me.
And now I cry to You as the Prodigal:
I have sinned before You, O merciful Father;
Receive me as a penitent and make me as one of Your hired servants.*

It is a hymn we might use as our prayer for Lent, but it needs to be sung with a new expectation; an expectation that as we turn again toward the Divine, that small movement of ours will be met with an equal and even more powerful movement from that which lies beyond the vision of Virgin Galactica.

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