

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost 11 September 2016

[Jeremiah 4: 11-28; Psalm 14; 1 Timothy 1: 1-2, 12-19 Luke 15:1-10](#) from Vanderbilt

[Proper 19C / Ordinary 24C / Pentecost +17 Sep 11, 2016](#) from Textweek

From the very early days of the Church; which began as an awakening or enlightenment within the familiar and long standing Jewish tradition; from those early days there has been a hanging on to the past which is still evidenced in our bible which holds both Old and New Testament texts, pre-Christ and post-Christ understandings.

So, every Sunday, as we go from one reading to another we actually move through quite different landscapes of understanding.

In the present, as we read these old texts, we are therefore drawn backwards, we turn toward the past; however, what is well illustrated today, is that the actual texts were written with an arrow pointing toward the future.

The future context of that arrow is quite important for us to appreciate as we reflect on the texts and seek to gain wisdom from them.

And perhaps that will become evident as we run through the various landscapes that are offered in today's readings.

The first reading from Jeremiah looks back to a time when Israel was anticipating an invasion from the Babylonians; and the future outlook was bleak; "*The whole land shall be a desolation*". The same reading also takes us back to a primitive understanding of God, for the impending 'desolation' is perceived as a judgement against "*this people and to Jerusalem*".

In this first landscape we see God very much understood as a mighty power, in control, and judging the actions of the people; and creating destruction if they were 'foolish', 'stupid' or 'doing evil'.

The Psalm leads us into a similar landscape of understanding with an image of an external God who again controls the fortunes of the world;

"2 The Lord looked down from heaven upon the children of Adam:
to see if there were any who would act wisely and seek after God."

Next we fast forward to the New Testament reading from '1 Timothy'; and already we can appreciate a different tempo; a movement from "*desolation*", "*fierce anger*" and "*evildoers*" "*struck with terror*" to a landscape of grace, mercy and peace.

However, we are still very much within the Judaic (Old Testament) tradition, but as the text points out there has been a shift, and Paul speaks of the reality of that shift from his own experience. Paul speaks of being changed and identifies a movement from his past traditions and practices to a new enlightened landscape; he speaks of the reality of living unbounded by the past and unbounded by death.

And yet we can also appreciate from verse 17 that he has not thrown God out; “*the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God*”; rather he has a very different understanding of God, different from that in Jeremiah’s landscape.

And we might just note that Paul has found something, he has received something that moves him out his past ignorance; he says; “*I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, 14 and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me*”; he discovers something within himself that he was previously ignorant of.

Next, in the gospel reading we are exploring Paul’s change even further; for the gospels seek to illustrate the change that was revealed in and through Christ. the writer is trying to explain for a wider audience the very change that Paul, and perhaps the early Church, had experienced; the gospels are mapping out a new landscape, a new understanding of God.

And the difficulty for the writer of Luke, which remains a difficulty for us and for the church today, is how to introduce a new insight when we are all blinkered by the tradition we have grown up with.

The writer provides a deliberate backdrop to the two parables being used as illustrations; the backdrop of the grumbling voices of the Pharisees and Scribes is used to illustrate the ever present reality that we are bound and blinded by our familiar worldview; and the tradition we hold on to restrains us from going beyond to explore a completely new reality.

Each of the two parables, the lost sheep and the lost coin, are explained at the end of their telling, and both have the same explanation; “*I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents*”.

And the repenting ‘sinner’ in this context is not one who does naughty things, but rather one who turns from ‘lost’ to ‘found’; one who sees beyond the obvious and the familiar to discover a new joy; a “*joy in heaven*”.

What is important for us to appreciate, what the gospel writer has cleverly sought to illustrate is a completely new worldview.

No longer do we stand in the landscape of Jeremiah with a God intervening with justice on humanity, rather ; “*I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents*”; it is the activity of humanity that creates Divine joy.

There is an amazing shift of perspective, and the activity previously ascribed to the primitive God in heaven is now grounded in the person of the shepherd going out into the wilderness to seek, and also in the person of the woman who lights a lamp in order to seek.

It is the seeking of humanity that makes manifest Divine activity; ‘the Word became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth.’

That shift in understanding has yet to be realised by the Church and by most of us; for bounded by tradition we still default to the pre-Christ landscape of Jeremiah.

Pause for a moment and reflect on your prayer life; are your prayers still offered and directed to Jeremiah’s God; do they still hold wishes for Divine intervention?

Are we culturally disempowering ourselves by leaving everything for God to sort out; is that why we, in our ignorance allow refugees to be refugees, and allow the hungry to go without food? William Wordsworth spoke of this same lament:

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;—
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!

We might follow the example of today's parables and pray from the place of the shepherd; going into the wilderness of our own ignorance and seeking that which is lost, that which will bring a "*joy in heaven*".

We might 'repent' and turn our prayer toward the place of the woman who lights a lamp; taking action with our own hands to dispel darkness and again seeking that which is lost, that which will bring a "*joy in heaven*".

The change that we read of in Paul, serves as an example, he is a prototype Christian; he experiences what Christ reveals, he turns from the old landscape of his tradition and walks into the future seeking his Christ-likeness... We have heard the same gospel; now all we need to do is to also turn from the past, turn from the familiar and actively seek that which we have lost.

The World Is Too Much With Us By William Wordsworth

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;—
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!
This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon;
The winds that will be howling at all hours,
And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;
For this, for everything, we are out of tune;
It moves us not. Great God! I'd rather be
A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;
Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathèd horn.