

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany 12 Feb 2017

[Deut 10: 12-22; Psalm 119: 1-9; 1 Cor 3: 1-9; Matthew 5:21-27](#) from Vanderbilt

[Epiphany 6A February 12, 2017](#) Textweek

Many parents, teachers, aunts and uncles; in fact many adults have told children the story of Father Christmas, and told it in such a way that the child fully believes in the story.

Long before that story was told and became popular there was another story that was told, actually many other stories. One that we are somewhat familiar with tells of a God, a father who lives way beyond the clouds and who created human beings, a Father who created each and all of us; he was so pleased with himself and with all he had created he said to himself "it is Good".

Then he told the men, not the women for he only spoke with the men, he told the men to cut off the piece of skin at the end of their penis so that they could be seen as being his people; and they did. This unusual tale was then taken and put into the bible and of course that makes it both special and true.

Do we ever wonder why children grow out of the first story into a deeper understanding and yet even today so many adults hold on to their belief in the circumcision story?

Paul encountered the same conundrum:

"And so, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. 2 I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready", and that is Paul addressing the Church!

Going back to the 6th and 7th Centuries before Christ, the writers of the Book of Deuteronomy compiled a series of sermons in the voice of Moses; these sermons form the last of the five books of the Torah, the Hebrew books of law; and these same books are now the first five books of the Bible; and that gives them quite a weighty authority

So the practice of circumcision was enshrined as a truth, a mark of the covenant with Abraham; and still today that same primitive ritual is maintained by most Jews, many Muslims and also some branches of the orthodox Christian church.

Within the first reading today there is however a very different reference to this practice;

"16 Circumcise, then, the foreskin of your heart, and do not be stubborn any longer."

That unusual and mystical utterance that has been put into the voice of Moses was overlooked, and is still overlooked by the modern 'Scribes and Pharisees' for the very same reason that we in Australia have "stopped the boats".

“Circumcise, then, the foreskin of your heart”;
we might ask ourselves what the writer was seeking to convey, and what this strange request means for us today?

It comes within the context of a sermon in which ‘Moses’ poses a rhetorical question and then provides the answer:

“So now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you? Only to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, 13 and to keep the commandments of the Lord your God and his decrees that I am commanding you today, for your own well-being.”

One of the foundational rituals that marked “the chosen ones” is here being cast in a very different light; for the traditional answer to “*what does the Lord your God require of you*” is ‘to be circumcised’, that would have been the accepted response, but here a different directive is given, and as if to make clear that this is a different orientation altogether the new order is revealed with;

“Circumcise, then, the foreskin of your heart”.

When we move forward in time 6-700 years the disciples, and remember they too, along with Jesus were of the Jewish faith; they also still had no understanding of this new vision.

According to the Gospel of Thomas (*saying 53*):

"His disciples said to him, 'is circumcision useful or not?' He said to them, 'If it were useful, their father would produce children already circumcised from their mother. Rather, the true circumcision in spirit has become profitable in every respect.'"

And today, now another 2000 years on and we still have failed to explore what the mystical utterance of Moses really means.

What is clear is that he was not suggesting a different ritual that involves open heart surgery, in fact he is seeking to evolve beyond ritual and to more fully answer the question he posed:

“what does the Lord your God require of you?”

As we begin looking into the icon offered by ‘Moses’,

“Circumcise, then, the foreskin of your heart”,

we will obviously be drawn toward an encounter with “love” for that is perhaps the first suggestion we think of in relation to the heart, and that is closely followed by the suggestion of ‘life’...

Are we being asked, or invited to look at the whole meaning of ‘love’ and ‘life’, and of our understanding of God in relation to both?

Alongside contemplating the readings this week I have been drawn back again and again to a book by Bede Griffiths called “A New Vision of Reality”; and here is a short quote that might take us deeper into the Mystical words of “Moses”:

As Karl Rahner says, the sense of self-transcendence is fundamental to human beings. We all have an urge to transcend ourselves. That is why people want to do things like climbing mountains and going to the moon. It is a need to transcend, to get beyond the self. That is also why we fall in love.

We want to get out of our self into another. Clearly we are drawn out of ourselves all the time, but this impulse towards self-transcendence is only fulfilled when we are drawn back to our source, when we give ourselves back totally to the origin from which we come. That is the ultimate meaning of the impulse of love.

[A New Vision of Reality – Bede Griffiths ISBN 0 00 627 636-9]

Bede Griffiths has an understanding of Love, the very nature, essence and activity of God, an understanding that goes beyond the primitive and perhaps that also is where we are being led when we go into the Icon of Moses;

“Circumcise, then, the foreskin of your heart”.

The early, or primitive understanding of love and of life itself was very much centred on genitals, we can see that from the Genesis story of Adam and Eve and their discovery of being naked; and it is retained even today, in ritual circumcision and in the whole debate around same sex marriage; genitals delineate difference, and that notion of difference has permeated both ‘love’ and ‘life’.

Even the Abrahamic Covenant that commanded circumcision ignored fifty percent of humanity for it only applied to men, and that differentiation is, even now, only slowly being rolled back.

‘Moses’ changes focus to the heart, to the unseen part of ourselves, and so to our undifferentiated natures; and that simple shift already becomes inclusive, for somehow we see everyone as having a heart and therefore having a sameness rather than a difference.

However that’s not all, he retains the action of circumcision, and so we might ask ourselves what has to be removed, or changed, or taken away from our heart-understanding of ‘love’ and ‘life’?

And that’s where we might be drawn into a completely new understanding, for the primitive notion of ‘love’ that we have culturally adopted is still very much misunderstood.

We ‘love’ our children and our families, and we leave them everything; that process of inheritance is the greatest contributor to the gap between rich and poor in the world. We ‘love’ our country; and that tribal understanding of nationalism is why we build walls and ‘stop the boats’.

We ‘love’ so many things, and in our culture we love those who have much, in fact we almost venerate the rich, and we love the idea that one day we too might be rich.

And we love either Paul or Apollos, seeking our belonging.

And of course we can only really love those with different genitalia, and so we reject, or reclassify love for members of the LGBT community.

“Circumcise, then, the foreskin of your heart”;

asks us to take off this self-centred notion of love, and to open ourselves to a love that seeks to give **ourselves back totally to the origin from which we come.**

The "Love of God" is not to be found in songs of praise, nor in ritual acts of disfigurement, it is to be found in going beyond that primitive understanding and seeking to find ourselves in the oneness of all, for only in finding the oneness of all do we encounter God.

Finally another writer who very much sees the same as that which perhaps Moses saw a long time ago:

In the stillness of your presence, you can feel your own formless and timeless reality as the unmanifested life that animates your physical form. You can then feel the same life deep within every other human and every other creature. You look beyond the veil of form and separation. This is the realization of oneness. This is love.

Eckhart Tolle

Peter Humphris