

Pentecost 10 – 24th July 16

Readings: Hosea 1: 2-10; Psalm 85; Colossians 2: 6-15 (16-19); Luke 11:1-13

Luke tells the story of the friend wanting three loaves of bread. Many years ago, when I was in the Army, Libbie and I lived in Perth. We were friends with another Army couple who had two small daughters who were learning ballet. Tickets went on sale for the ballet school concert and they were in very high demand. So Joan, our friend decided to queue early in the morning for tickets. About 4am (not midnight) we heard someone tapping on the bedroom window. They kept tapping. Then we heard Joan's voice "Libbie, Libbie, can I have some cigarettes please". What did we do? Well, we were smokers then so we got up and gave her some cigarettes. Who says the Gospels aren't relevant to our daily lives?

Last Tuesday a parishioner asked me about a particular difficulty they were experiencing. It was about personal bible study and in particular one book of the Old Testament that was part of their personal bible study. It was the Book of Judges.....and the parishioner who spoke to me was finding the book quite troubling, disturbing even because of the terrible violence depicted in and the depiction of God in it as well – as angry, violent, vindictive even. My reply was that the Book of Judges does indeed contain a great deal of violence. It depicts a particularly violent period in Israel's history. One thing about many of the Old Testament book is that they are a warts and all account of human behaviour. Think of the stories of King David, especially how he arranged to have Uriah killed so he could sleep with Bathsheba. Bishop Burgmann of Canberra-Goulburn had a favourite question for students along the lines of given everything that David did, how could he be "A man after God's own heart?" Part of the answer is that God is still God and can act despite the worst of human behaviour. Some of the stories in Judges, like that of Jephthah's daughter are absolutely appalling. I'm reminded (although I wasn't on Tuesday but I've remembered since) of a story I was told of the late Bishop Hudson who was a much loved parishioner at Caloundra before my time as Rector there. The story went that more than once after some especially bloodthirsty reading he would look up and say "This is supposed to be the Word of the Lord." My advice to the parishioner was that if Judges upsets you, stop reading it look elsewhere in the Bible.¹

This morning's Gospel can help us in this context as well, in particular Jesus' description of God's relationship with the world found in Luke 11:13: "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" These words point us toward a healthy theological reflection and serve as an antidote to demonic images of God, even, it has to be said, those which come from many Christians. These words chart a relational and affirming theology.

¹ The remaining part of the sermon draws upon Bruce Epperley "The Adventurous Lectionary – Tenth Sunday of Pentecost – July 24, 2016" at www.patheos.com

“God gives good gifts to God’s children!” Jesus asserts that even “evil” [or the word also means “evil intention” – others suggest “imperfect”] parents want the best for their children. Accordingly, won’t the perfect Parent, God, want to give you more? If I were to ask you what God is like, most I think would respond with words like “loving,” “forgiving,” “creative,” “universal.” Few would say, “punitive,” “angry,” “vindictive,” or “hateful.” Yet, such descriptors are regularly spewed forth from some church pastors, televangelists, and major figures in conservative Christianity. Some of these religious leaders have identified war, pestilence, AIDS, and even the recent Orlando shootings as divine punishment. These preachers suggested that somehow God was behind the Orlando attack that left dozens injured or dead. Many of you know I have a particular love for Papua New Guinea. You may recall there was a devastating tsunami on the north coast there some years ago. There were any number of so called Christian leaders who said this was God’s punishment. And many listeners to such people nod their heads without recognizing the theological inconsistency of talking about God’s love, on the one hand, and God’s ruthless destruction, on the other. Today’s scripture would say such comments are blasphemy – strong word, I now - and should never be invoked from the pulpit or on social media. In fact, many people glibly assume God would perform certain actions – let loose viruses, destroy cities with storms, or initiate massacres – that would be considered hate crimes, punishable by imprisonment, if performed by a human. Their God is more like a narcissistic demon than the God who comes to us in human form as Jesus Christ who welcomes, heals, loves, forgives, and gives his all. In him, Paul tells the Colossians this morning, the fullness of deity dwells.²

There are sordid and violent images associated with divine power and punishment. It can be surprising, as it was for the parishioner who spoke to me that demonic images of God do appear in scripture as well as popular dialogue. It concerns me that there are many Christians who seem to want to exalt power over love in describing God, and if they had to abandon one concept, they would jettison love before they would let go of power. Indeed, Donald Trump, the Republican candidate for the presidency of the United States has considerable support from conservative, mostly white evangelical Christians in the United States because he has appealed directly to this sense of power.

In Luke 11, Jesus describes God as the Loving Father; and you can use the term “Mother” if you wish. God is not gendered. God seeks a world in which God’s will or vision be enacted on earth as it is in heaven. In other words, God wants the world to be defined by loving, welcoming, going the second mile, and accepting diversity spiritual habits. If God is loving, then our calling is to be as loving as God.

² Colossians 2:9

There is cause and effect at work all around us. Bad lifestyle habits increase our possibility of life-threatening illness. Materialism and greed make us oblivious to beauty and diminish our spirits. Injustice leads to social unrest. Particularly in the US context, trusting in guns not God for ultimate security leaves in its wake unprecedented violence. God wants us to aspire to become as much like Christ as possible. God's ultimate aim is healing not harm. Made alive in Christ, we can embody Jesus' message and mission. We can become "little Christs," as Martin Luther said. This is the spiritual and ethical meaning of the passage from Colossians: "For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness in him." We are "full of Christ" and our vocation is to let that fullness, that never ending stream of love, flow from us to the world.

Today, let us vow to invoke God's name only in ways that bring greater beauty and love to the world. Let us claim a Loving Parent, Mother and Father, and mirror our Parent in all aspects of our lives - personal, family, work, community and politics.