

Sermon for 9th June 2024, Pentecost 3, Proper 5, Year B.

Preached at St Serf Shettleston

2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1; Mark 3:20-end

Sermon

Whenever I come to write a sermon, the first thing I do is to carefully work through the readings that have been set by the lectionary, to try to figure out what theme they might have in common. It's like having several different perspectives on a problem. What you can't quite see from one angle, you might be able to figure out from another.

For example, what our Old Testament reading from Genesis and our Gospel reading from Mark have in common is that they both refer to the Devil, albeit in different ways. Mark's gospel has Jesus being accused by the scribes and Pharisees of healing by Satan's power, rather than by God's. Meanwhile, the Genesis reading tells the story of the serpent – assumed by later scripture to be Satan – being punished by God for deceiving Adam and Eve. The Pharisees are clearly trying to portray Jesus's healings as devilish deceptions.

But, this morning I'm actually more interested in what the Gospel reading might have in common with Paul's letter to the Corinthian church, in which Paul reassures us that regardless of how our human bodies are wasting away through age or illness, what matters is that our inner spirit is growing stronger as we spend more time closer to God. What cannot be seen, he says, is far more important than what can be seen.

So, what does this have in common with the Gospel reading? Well, possibly several things, but what stands out to me is that in both cases what's really going on is not at all what it looks like on the surface.

For example, Paul is constantly arguing with people who say that what's most important is that you follow all the religious rules. But for Paul, following commandments out of fear or compulsion is to entirely miss the point of what is really going on, which is that God wants us to do good because we are loved, out of an overflowing of that love.

Likewise, the holy and religious people are hounding Jesus because he's not following the rules – he's healing on the Sabbath, he's hanging out with the wrong crowd, he's forgiving sinners, being kind to them, and telling them they're loved and included in God's family. Jesus, too, tells his opponents, "What's going on here is not what you think. What's going on is love, and the only sin here is mistaking love for evil, calling the work of the Holy Spirit an act of the devil".

The rest of this story in Mark's gospel is also full of reversals. At the start of the story Jesus' family is worried that he has 'gone out of his mind'. The Greek phrase literally says, "he has stood outside". It's a bit like someone described as being 'beside themselves' or 'out of it'. Anyway, at the end of the story, Jesus' family show up and *they're* described as literally "standing outside". That's totally deliberate. It's another clever reversal. They have come to accuse Jesus of 'standing outside', of having gone crazy, but they're the ones literally standing outside while Jesus tells those inside – all that diverse, imperfect, mess of humanity crowding inside his home, that they are his true family if they do God's will by loving one another.

With God, what you see at first glance is rarely what's really going on. Paul cries out to his churches, 'Don't be disheartened by the temporary things you see on the surface. See instead God's eternal glory, which is always present'. Paul calls us not just to identify with the humble and weak who God uses to shame the proud and powerful, but he says that God's most powerful weapons are things which don't even seem to exist – our stories and dreams, our songs and poems, the truths we tell each other, that are not yet facts.

There's one such old true story about a disciple and his teacher. The disciple asks, "Where is God?" "Right here," says the teacher. "Then why can't I see him?" "Because you don't look". "What am I looking for?" says the disciple. "Nothing. Just look". "But at what?" "Anything your eyes catch on". "Do I look in a particular kind of way?" "No, an ordinary way". "But don't I always look the ordinary way?" the disciple protested, now becoming frustrated. "No, you don't," the teacher replied. "Because to look, you must be entirely here. You're always mostly somewhere else".

Disciples always miss the point in these sorts of stories. They, like us, want answers, rules, instruction guides. "Do x, y, and z, and get to heaven". But instruction guides and commandments can never by themselves make us the people God wants us to be. We can read all the books we like about playing a musical instrument, but if we never pick it up and practice, we will never know the truth of what it means to be a musician, to feel the music flowing through us, to realise that we are not playing the music, but the music is playing us.

In our faith, the instrument we must learn to play is called prayer. Prayer is the means by which we make ourselves entirely here. Prayer is the way we start to see beyond the temporary to the eternal presence of God. Prayer is how we begin to see the reality of love behind what we think of as real.

The twentieth century mystic and monk Thomas Merton once famously wrote that "In Louisville, in the centre of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realisation that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream... If only everyone could realise this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun. Then it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person

that each one is in God's eyes. If only they could all see themselves as they really are. If only we could see each other that way all the time. There would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed..."

[This quote could easily have started, "In Shettleston, in the checkout queue at Tesco, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realisation that I loved all these people..."]

This sort of revelation shows how prayer can transform us so that we see the world as God sees it, infused with love and compassion. It shifts us from seeing only faults and failures like the scribes and Pharisees, and from experiencing disappointment or despair like some in Paul's churches, until we see instead God's deeper reality that is always present under the surface, here, now and everywhere.

This is the great promise of our faith; not that if we obey the commandments all our lives, we'll eventually get our reward, but that by spending time with God, we might be so transformed that we come to see all of humanity as God sees us, shining and beautiful like the sun, and profoundly easy to love.