

3rd Sunday after Pentecost

Gen 3:8-15; Ps 130; 2 Cor 4: 13-5:1; Mk 3: 20-35.

None of us likes to be dependent on anyone else do we? We like to know that we have the resources and knowledge to run our own lives and work out where we are going with our lives.

I wonder whether that was something of what Adam and Eve felt, in that, if they actually went the way of eating the apple, they would know a whole lot more about running their lives, they would have more knowledge to do so. The serpent was very cunning in pitching the temptation towards knowledge, as who doesn't want to know more about life?

But what it does is put a barrier up in their relationship with God. So instead of being able to walk naked with God in the cool of the garden, just as they were, they needed to put some sort of covering or protection from God. Their action took away some of the intimacy and trust they had in God, and created a distance or alienation from God to some extent.

In the Gospel we have another version of this wanting to be in control, and not open to the ways of God. The crowds are more straight forward in their approach to Jesus, and come to see and listen. But the scribes, biblical scholars of the day, go to be critical. At the beginning of this third chapter of Mark, we are told about how Jesus healed a man's withered hand on a sabbath in the synagogue, and after he challenged the people on a point of law. Not the way to 'win friends and influence people' in the Jewish world. Jesus framed his question, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?" (Mk 3:4). Of course, no one was going to say that it was only lawful to do harm and kill on the sabbath. But a strict Jew, because this was not a life-threatening situation, would have asked the man with the withered hand to come back the next day.

Jesus, having 'come from God', knows about the nature of who God is more directly than the scribes, who only know about God through the mediation of the scriptures. Jesus knows that God is about love and healing... always. The sabbath is about rest and refreshment, well this was about healing or refreshing the man's hand.

The scribes however were crack biblical scholars, and knew that the Bible says you cannot do unessential work on the sabbath, and this

healing was unessential in that it could have waited until tomorrow. Therefore, in their eyes, Jesus could not be doing God's work. Straight forward in their thinking! So, it's an obvious connection to draw, that if Jesus is not doing God's work, he must be doing the work of the devil, or Beelzebub.

But Jesus then turns the argument around, pointing out that if healing is in fact a casting out of Satan, how could he as Satan's representative, be casting out Satan?

The ending of this section stating that in some cases people cannot be forgiven, seems to cause a lot of offence to Christians these days, and it does seem harsh coming from a loving God. But it has a logic about it, because if you call the spirit or work of God satanic, then you are denying that it is God's spirit and therefore not allowing God's spirit to work in you. It is we ourselves who render the power of God powerless, by refusing to acknowledge what and who it is.

In my work in the hospital, I have actually seen this played out in terms of the healing process. If you want to have the latest in modern medical science and expertise, then the Alfred is a pretty good place to be if you are ill. BUT, and it is a big BUT, doctors can do everything in their power, and a person just does not respond. People can languish in their bed for no apparent reason.

However, if you explore their spiritual space with them, sometimes, for example, it might turn out that they believe that have done some wrong and that this is what they deserve, rather than looking to God for forgiveness. They turn their back on forgiveness or God's spirit at work, because their belief in their wrong-doing is greater. And they never do well. It is the most difficult of pastoral scenarios!

However, I have also seen the reverse. That is, when someone who has been languishing can get hold of what is going on spiritually and work with that, they can turn around very quickly, within days or even hours sometimes. These people acknowledge who and what spirit is at work. It is quite miraculous, and you certainly know that God's healing spirit is at work. I used to reckon that God was very busy in those corridors.

In contrast to negating the action or spirit of God, we have the opposite faith position in our epistle for today. And while the negative thinking might seem scientific, logical and even biblical

sometimes, faith is not always scientific or logical, but it complies with the nature of who God is. As Jane Williams says in a commentary, both Jesus and the faith position are looking at the reality of God, not the theory of God, as the scribes were doing.¹

Corinthians says, "... we also believe, and so we speak, because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence" (2 Cor 4:13b-14). So Paul is saying, that when we recognise the work of God, as in Jesus resurrection to new life, we open ourselves up to that same work of God, so we too can experience new life, and healing and knowledge of God. And this is a journey that we take together and personally. And who knows where it will take us? Certainly beyond our comfort zones at times, and certainly beyond what we thought was our own capacity to be or do. We will be stretched, enlivened, healed at every level of our being, which is not always synonymous with cure, but perhaps the old English word 'wholeness' sums up this healing better.

And together with each other and God's Holy Spirit, we will be brought into the presence of God, of which this Eucharist is a foretaste. We are always in God's presence, of course, although mostly we are the ones not present to that fact, but in this service we have the opportunity to hear God speak to us, and feed us, and love us in the company of others who are also here to listen and be fed.

As St Benedict writes at the end of his Rule, "May Christ bring us altogether to everlasting life."² Amen

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¹ Jane Williams, *Lectionary Reflections Years A, B and C*, (Great Britain: SPCK, 2011), 78-9.

² RB 72:12.