

Reflection for Sunday 6th June 2021

Genesis 3; 8-15 Mark 3; 20-35

Collect *“Difficult God, who the world judges mad or worse: reveal our life’s distortions posing as normality; enlarge our sense of family beyond those close to us; and cast down Satan’s kingdom of cruelty and exclusion; through Jesus Christ, the one who is accused. Amen”*

(Prayers for the Inclusive Church)

Where are you?

I would like to be frank with you from the very beginning: the readings today are tough; they are not very easy to explain, and on top of that they are dangerous readings. They aren’t easy to hear, to experience, to come through the other end. It is not about having to hate our family; it is not about apples (they aren’t really mentioned in the reading) ... so what is it about? It is about feeling lost, and knowing we are found; it is about being loved even in our un-loveable moments.

And this is why I want to refer to the Reflection from last Sunday, which was Mark Barrett’s preaching at Christ Church; he refers to the perfect relationship of love, where love loves, and this is what we are called to do *“not just the people in our congregations, or our neighbourhood, or even our family, but everyone for we are all made in the image of God”*. Further on, he will remind us that *“relationships are fractured in this world, between people, between communities, for all sorts of ungodly reasons...”* so, if we now go back to the readings and consider them through this lens, we may come to a firmer understanding of what is being said.

The well know story in Genesis, from here comes the haunting question: *Where are you?* Not our question to God, but rather God’s question to us. And this is a difficult question, because we usually believe God knows all, and so why the question. The difficulty, we realise is not the question, but the answer. All this takes place in the garden, where all had been declared “Good” by God, but now things aren’t that good. Where God had created relationships, this is the story of relationships been broken, where guilt is cast left-right-and centre; where there was trust, now there is mistrust. If all this was so good, what happened to reach this point. It is the story of the search for (our) independence rather than mutual dependence. Sigmund Freud explains adolescence as that time in which children become “independent” from their parents and develop their own personality; they see themselves as different from their parents, and that is usually a hurtful and painful experience; but when it is done in love, it is also a healing and care time (in the end!), **it will** develop a new and loving relationship of mutual respect. Freud is not referring to this reading of Exodus, but it can certainly explain it.

God lovingly asks *Where are you?* And the response is that they are hiding because they have discovered themselves as naked and feel ashamed. Probably something most of us could relate to - there is nothing to “shield/protect” us. And where that had not been a problem in the past, suddenly it is. It a loss of innocence which creates a fear of God. And still God stands there longing to love, a love that will continue all the way forward in the Bible.

And now we see this development in the early chapters of the Gospel of Mark – lots of good things have happened: the calling of the disciples, the healing of leprosy, and fevers and diseases, casting out evil spirits, and even proclaiming being Lord of the Sabbath, till those who feel they have power and authority can take this no more – they accuse Jesus of being possessed by the “prince of demons”.

Once again, as in Genesis, all was going well till it doesn't go well. Who is the opposition? Could it be the family? Could it be Satan? Could it be the strong man? We can discard two of these three: family will always be central -Jesus is not anti-family (though he does widen the idea we have of family); and we have also seen Jesus conquer Satan, so all we have left is that sense of strength/power, and as we will discover as we follow this Gospel over the weeks to come, Jesus proclaims power that does not come from God as evil.

All the "isms" we have spoken about before are represented here: sexism, racism, militarism, ageism, individualism, nationalism, fundamentalism... all "isms" that tear apart the wholeness of life, the integrity of life, that are destructive. They deny the power of God who comes to us in Love, and through love cares, forgives, redeems. Our calling is to question these "isms", not to align with them. I believe the sin against the Holy Spirit is that denial of love for all God's children, as we are all made in God's image. The enemy of Jesus's mission, preaching, healing, and teaching has been that sense of power which displaces God, that denial of love which comes from the relationship we find in the Trinity. God's will is this mutuality of love, and that is how we are recognised as God's children.

This week, I read a quote from Monsignor Oscar Romero, the murdered archbishop of El Salvador, who became a martyr for his faith, who is one of the modern martyrs we can find on the West Portico of Westminster Abbey, he said: *'a church that does not provoke any crisis, preach a gospel that does not unsettle, proclaim a word of God that does not get under anyone's skin or a word of God that does not touch the real sin of the society in which it is being proclaimed: what kind of gospel is that?'*. That is why the powerful rejected Jesus, that is why Jesus was crucified. Their lack of love for others is the example of that sin Jesus talks about, the unforgivable sin. That is why the faithful church continues to be rejected. That is why we are called to love.

When all that was good, suddenly starts to go wrong – we don't have to ask God: "where are you?" because God is there: God is present, God is in the midst of the 'gone wrong', God is on the cross, God is in the garden of the empty tomb, God is in the multitude seeking to be fed, cured, loved. God is there, and it is God who will ask us: "where are you?", and then say, come, let's keep going, together. This is love. This is God's plan for creation. This is good. So, how will we respond to the question?