

The Difference God Makes

Sermon for the 4th Sunday after Pentecost, Year B, 17 June 2018

St Philip's Anglican Church O'Connor, ACT, Australia

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Ezekiel 17: 22-24; Psalm 92: 1-4, 12-15; 2 Corinthians 5: 6-10, 14-17; Mark 4: 26-34

René Girard, who I've been studying and writing about, puts a question to we dwellers in the modern world: "How can we save ourselves ... in the absence of God, if not by surpassing our fellow human beings in all sorts of worldly endeavours?"ⁱ Girard believes that the issue today isn't so much a loss of belief in God, as a shift in where we place our ultimate trust. Since it's no longer God we look to, instead we make gods of one another. We aspire to have, to be, what others model for us. Our desires retain a great devotion, though now we've brought God down to earth, even though we don't like to admit it. And without God to save us, we have to save ourselves. We do this by competing, by striving to be winners, by putting on a good show, or by cultivating resilience and toughing it out until our luck changes. So, at work it's up the greasy pole, while in our time off it's subtly competing with friends and family about who's the most successful. Our pubs and clubs are clogged with young people on Tinder desperate for some affirmation, just as the rivers of Europe are clogged with our retirees, all eager to show off

the pics from their luxury cruise to the less well-off back home. “O brave new world, that has such people in it.”

But, friends, here in the Eucharist—here in the alternative reality of word and sacrament, here where the cross tells a different story about human success, here where salvation is a free gift, and not a lifetime’s unremitting labour—we hear and we learn to tell a different story.

Here we eavesdrop on St Paul, in our Epistle today, who has been struggling in his apostolic vocation, founding and guiding the earliest Churches in tough times. He confides in us about the frailty of his condition, and the difficulty of his circumstances yet, as elsewhere, he testifies to God’s strength made perfect in weakness. Now, in today’s reading Paul might seem to be longing for escape from the body, and to be showing a contempt for life in the body that many later Christians have unhelpfully taken up. But that’s not the case. All our readings today are full of organic imagery: trees, branches, seeds, sap, and growth. Because in truth the spiritual is no enemy of the organic, of the embodied, or indeed of the sexual—as many have feared.

Rather, when Paul laments his bodily condition today, he’s referring to a feeling of powerlessness, of exposure. Yet in this very condition,

which so many people these days flee from or try to cover up, Paul finds strength in Jesus Christ, who embraced weakness and exposure on the cross, only to be raised and vindicated by his Father. This is how Paul can give his resounding testimony today: that, despite appearances, despite how bad things might seem, Christians are a new creation in Jesus Christ, and hence we mustn't let ourselves be deflected from that, we mustn't sell ourselves short.

And, friends, this isn't the power of positive thinking—which is the Norman Vincent Peale alternative to the Gospel that the likes of Donald J. Trump believe in. Rather, this is genuine, lived, Christian faith, which takes its bearings from our baptism, from our membership in Jesus Christ, and not from any worldly reckoning of our success, of our circumstances, of our own strength.

Our other readings in the lectionary this morning support this vision. The tone of our psalm is joyful—even joyful about growing old, when the promise is that we men will be full of sap (and I think older men might guess what this means). You might think that this sounds like wishful thinking but it means that, despite how things might seem, our God will never be finished with us—that right until the end we can be a force to be reckoned with, and a source of life for others.

Our Ezekiel reading this morning gives the reason for this confidence, using more organic imagery. The mighty tree that God brings to birth is of course the Messiah, who will turn the tables on every worldly calculus of success, of power, of winning. Our God is emphatic about making “low the high tree, and [making] high the low tree, [making] dry the green tree and [making] the dry tree flourish: I the Lord have spoken, I will accomplish it” (Ezek 17: 24).

In this long green season of the Church year, following Pentecost, when growth in Christ is symbolized by the green vestments and hangings, today’s Gospel reading takes up the promise of growth from God. In Jesus’ parable today, the seeds sown by God start small, but they carry the power of God’s coming Kingdom and their advance is unstoppable. It’s almost as if we can just sit back and watch it happen, until the time for harvest comes. The imagery in today’s Gospel parables develops, offering a contrast between a tiny mustard seed and the most vigorous of plants that grows from it, laden with branches, sprouting new life in all directions, providing shelter for all manner of creatures. Here the imagery of trees and growth in Ezekiel, which signifies the coming of the Messiah, is now extended to us, so that in Christ you and I are reminded that we share in this rich, life-giving reality.

So, friends, the challenge is to embrace the alternative reality of word and sacrament, and the story we hear in this place week by week. That's how we'll find out who we most truly are. René Girard tells us that without God, we compete to exalt and ultimately to save ourselves—how else could we cope with our weakness and frailty? But with the God of Jesus Christ, who draws near to us in the Holy Spirit, our Advocate for the Defence, we rise with Christ beyond our fears, beyond our failures, and beyond the accusing voices that, if we let them, will set the agenda for our lives. Because, friends, our baptism declares that we deserve better than this, that we don't have to settle for this, that we can do better than this.

The Lord be with you ...

ⁱ René Girard, "Memoirs of a Dutiful Existentialist: Simone de Beauvoir" (1961), in *Mimesis and Theory: Essays on Literature and Criticism, 1953-2005* (Stanford University Press, 2008), 50-55, on 51.