

Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost - 2017

'Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed.' From today's gospel reading.

Today is the last day of this season of Sundays after Pentecost, next week we will round off the year with the great celebration of Christ the King before beginning once again the Church year with the Advent season. St Paul talks today about times and seasons, but he warns too about finding in them peace and security. The church's year does provide a pattern for living; moving through the seasons helps us to better understand and celebrate life and faith. But there is a danger in seeing the Church year as being a bit like a giant hamster wheel that none of us can get off, we are running hard but getting nowhere! We really must have an idea of movement that is both linear as well as circular, we are indeed going somewhere, or should be; we are on pilgrimage and part of pilgrimage is greater understanding, growth in faith, not necessarily peace and security! The season of Sundays after Pentecost is for just that, to be open, attentive to the Spirit in our lives and through that Spirit to grow in faith.

I wonder if any of you remember the great scene in Fawlty Towers when Basil decides to have a fire drill. In the middle of the mayhem there really is a real fire and Basil manages to lock Manuel in the kitchen where the fire is! Manuel escapes but Basil can't find the key to activate the fire alarm and rages behind the counter in classic Fawlty fashion, shaking his fist at God, 'thank you God, thank you very bloody much!' It is of course complete slapstick but there is something deep within the Judaeo-Christian tradition about 'having a go' at God. If we can theologise for a moment about Basil, his railing against God for hiding the key to the fire alarm should serve in a reflective moment to remind him that God has nothing to do with his fire alarm. God does not want his hotel to burn down; God does not control things in the way that Basil thinks that God does or should. Such reflection should then lead to a greater understanding about God, a renewed understanding.

Some of the longer Psalms take us on such a journey, Psalm 89 is one of them, it begins with praise:

I will sing of your steadfast love, O Lord, for ever;
with my mouth I will proclaim your faithfulness to all generations.
I declare that your steadfast love is established for ever;
your faithfulness is as firm as the heavens.

It goes to speak of God's power and might and all the things we expect to hear...but then towards the end:

Lord, where is your steadfast love of old,
which by your faithfulness you swore to David?

But the psalmist still concludes:

Blessed be the Lord for ever. Amen and Amen.

So often, as in that Psalm, and in other places like the Book of Job the rejection of a God who has failed to save or protect opens up a new picture of a God who isn't there to save or protect in the way we might understand. I spoke last week about the French philosopher Simone Weil, she argued, in the context of the holocaust that any picture of God that survived genocide would be almost unrecognisably different from any earlier one. "Blaspheming," raging against the God who fails – which is in effect attacking your own religious comfort zone – can be a moment of maturing faith. When we rail against God for failing to prevent an earthquake, or protect children from war or disease or finding me a parking spot should serve to remind us of what God is, and that often means a shift in our thinking about God and that sometimes is difficult and painful.

This week has seen a momentous event in our nation: the Soccerroos have qualified for the World Cup final...just joking! The people of the nation have clearly stated that they believe that the Marriage Act should be amended to include all couples of whatever sex. I understand the strong feeling on both sides of the debate, but I don't believe that somehow God needs to be protected; worshipped, adored... yes! But I wonder about legislation that suggests that God needs human protection and that faith is so frail that it cannot survive exposure to honest, heartfelt human emotion or intelligence. Whatever your views on the events of this week it does provide us with the opportunity to think about the God that we proclaim.

I think that in our gospel reading this morning Jesus was endeavouring to provide us with a different vision of God. The talents that were given to the three servants could represent a myriad of things. If it was currency then it was a vast amount; it was great treasure indeed. I think Jesus wanted us to consider what it is that we treasure or *should* treasure; remember in another place where your treasure is your heart will be also. Perhaps the talents were love and the master (God) going away represents our freedom in love. What do we do with that love that is God? Do we invest it in our relationships, risky business – you might lose it all! Or is it a private thing that we hold onto something which we own and want to protect? The last servant clearly did not understand the nature of God. Hence his rage against the almighty! It is my hope though that he might know God's mercy after visiting the celestial dentist 'where there is gnashing of teeth' and he would better understand God and that God does not need to be protected, buried in the ground!

So as we look back over the season of the Spirit – what of your view of God? We are all prone to wanting to make God in our own image, it is *the* human failing par excellence, and from there we feel the need to protect this God. I pray that we can be prepared to invest God and in doing so say with the Blessed Virgin: 'My soul magnifies the Lord.' Amen.