

SERMON Easter Day 2013

Risen God, open our hearts to your presence, our minds to your truth. Amen.

We have journeyed through Lent with a prayer poem by the Australian poet and cartoonist Michael Leunig. This morning I will be using another of his prayer poems – this time a supremely reductionist, but nonetheless compelling, analysis of existence. Condensing reality into two polarities, he writes:

There are only two feelings, love and fear
There are only two languages, love and fear
There are only two activities, love and fear
There are only two motives, two procedures, two frameworks, two results

Love and fear
Love and fear. (Michael Leunig: 1998)

On Good Friday it seemed that fear had consumed and obliterated love. Pilate was afraid of the Jewish crowd and of the religious authorities. The religious authorities in their turn also operated out of fear. The cynical would say that they were afraid that Jesus would subvert their power base.

This may be so, or it may be that their fear had a more laudable cause – perhaps they were afraid that he was a false prophet, leading the Jewish people to desert the one true God. Their understanding of their history would lead them to fear God's response to any deviation from true faith. The Hebrew Scriptures are full of stories of God's swift and catastrophic retribution for such apostasy. And here was this scruffy teacher attacking the fundamental principle of obedience to the Law: he broke the rules about the Sabbath, he claimed to heal people in God's name and, blasphemy of blasphemies, he forgave sins – a prerogative belonging only to God. Heaven alone knew how many other commandments he had breached. I have no doubt that many of the priests would have felt that it was their duty before God to oppose Jesus and to defend the Jewish people from God's inevitable wrath.

This leads us to the supremely ironic conclusion that one of the contributing factors to the death of Jesus, the death of God living

among us, was a fear of God. Jesus' arrest, trial and crucifixion were all about fear.

But the message of the resurrection is a double header: God is love and love wins. The various fears which clouded human perception and human judgment and which, ultimately, led to Jesus' death did not put an end to God's connection with us or to God's love for us. Indeed, God could take the very worst that we could do into the heart of the Godhead and still refuse to abandon us. The unconditional, uncompromising and sacrificial love which took Jesus to the cross, breaks through all the human understandings of life and death to reach us and to connect the divine and the human eternally.

We are used to the idea but when you think about it, it is indeed extraordinary that, after all the misunderstanding and after the violence that characterized humanity's response to Jesus, God would still want to have anything to do with us. You would think God might have been tempted to go somewhere else (Alpha Centauri maybe?), But the evidence is there and it is clear. Whatever we might do, God longs to be in relationship with us and will not desert us.

This is good news indeed. And it is light years away from the Old Testament understanding of the nature of God. This is not a God who punishes us for infringements of a divinely laid down code – this is a God who takes the very worst of what we do, who even bears the scars of it, and who then seeks us out, not to take revenge on us, but to reassure us. Just think of his post-resurrection encounter with Peter, carefully asking him three times whether he loved him, undoing Peter's triple denial of him before the crucifixion.

In Jesus' life, in his teachings and his actions, we see revealed the response of love to the particular circumstances of the society in which he lived. This was a man who hung about with down and outs, who brought healing to people who were suffering from physical and mental illness, from emotional distress. This was a man who attacked injustice, who challenged the privileged about their blindness and hypocrisy and both the privileged and the marginalized about their unwillingness to change.

At one level it was a 'small' ministry. Lasting only a few years and located in a small, remote and troubled corner of the Roman empire, it was a ministry focused on encounter with individuals and not with systemic change per se. The gospel accounts suggest that Jesus was not there with those who had power, trying to change the way the society was structured. He spent his days in prayer and

with people who were sick, people who had time just to sit and listen. Jesus was desperately concerned with the wellbeing of individuals.

But Jesus' death and resurrection take his life, his teachings and his actions out of that small sphere into an altogether different sphere.

His 'small' ministry did no less than show us what God is like and how God acts in this world. Jesus' death and resurrection show us that God loves us eternally, passionately, uncompromisingly, indestructibly, come what may. The incarnation was no once off – it is a glimpse of eternity. And so it is with fire, light and water that we welcome the risen Christ, symbolizing the extraordinary transformation wrought by the resurrection.

The Christian story also pushes us to the edge of our understanding. I do not mean that it is irrational or incompatible with rationality, but it certainly does strain it at its edges. The resurrection takes us so far out of normal human experience that we must let go of all that we think we know and embrace the possibility that there are things we simply cannot understand using the categories and thought processes that we normally apply in everyday life. Easter blasts our intellectual socks off. We can choose to reject it and its implications, or we can choose to explore it.

If we choose to explore it, to try to live it out day by day, we will find a God who does not punish us but rather a God who takes the very worst we can do, who even bears the scars of it, and who then seeks us out to forgive us, love us and reassure us. Jesus' death and resurrection show us that God's love is eternal, passionate, and unconditional. Love wins, perfect love has cast out fear, the gate of glory is open – let us celebrate for he is risen, he is risen indeed! Amen.

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