

St Andrew's on The Terrace Sunday 21 Oct 2018 Pentecost 22 'Left handed power'

Readings for the Gathering

Hebrew Bible

Job 38: 1-7

God Speaks

Then God spoke to Job out of the storm and said:

2 "Who is this that obscures my plans/with words without knowledge?

3 Brace yourself;/ I will question you,/ and you shall answer me.

4 "Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation?/ Tell me, if you understand./ 5 Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know!/ Who stretched a measuring line across it?/ 6 On what were its footings set,

or who laid its cornerstone—/ 7 while the morning stars sang together

and all the angels shouted for joy?

Gospel

Mark 10:35-45

The Request of James and John

35 Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. "Teacher," they said, "we want you to do for us whatever we ask." 36 "What do you want me to do for you?" he asked. 37 They replied, "Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory." 38 "You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said. "Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?" 39 "We can," they answered. Jesus said to them, "You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with, 40 but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared." 41 When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John. 42 Jesus called them together and said, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. 43 Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, 44 and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. 45 For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Contemporary reading

from "Kingdom, Grace and Judgment"

by Robert Farrar Capon pp18-19

But such a paradoxical exercise of power, please note, is a hundred and eighty degrees away from the straight-line variety. It is, to introduce a phrase from Luther, left-handed power... Left-handed power is precisely paradoxical power: power that looks for all the world like weakness, intervention that seems indistinguishable from non-intervention.

Reflection for the Gathering

It's a little difficult to know how to speak today since the reflection I prepared for last week didn't get spoken though some of you took a copy home. So today will be a little of that and an extension of that – you might want to take two reflections home with you today!

The flat refusal of two thirds of the Assembly two weeks ago to study a book which asks us to change our mind gives us a platform from which to assess where we are as church and as spiritual individuals.

I have pondered long and hard what it is that makes the LGBT issue in the church such a hot potato. Part of the reason is the different importance parts of the church give to the Bible. For fundamentalist and conventional believers, the Bible is an extremely holy book, inspired, if not actually written, by God and therefore carrying great weight for those believers. It also is regarded as an instruction book on how to avoid hell which is a real concept for those same believers. People who are in the early stages of faith do not understand and cannot comprehend how people think and believe at later stages of faith. It is hard for them to imagine a life without a God out there dispensing holy words and judging whether or not people will make it to heaven or hell. Thus to change someone's mind from this group within the church requires long, careful re-education in how the Bible might be viewed or a personal experience like Paul's Damascus Road experience. Part of that education would point out

how already those same people treat some passages contextually – for example the instruction for women to keep their heads covered in church in the second testament and prohibitions against eating pork and the ban on wearing clothing of mixed fibres in the Hebrew Bible. Otherwise, most of you should leave this church right away if you have done any of these things!

For such believers, if one simply takes the words at face value and does not apply a contextual reading and careful exegesis to the passages, in this extremely holy book of Scriptures, there seem to be prohibitions against same sex couplings. For such a Christian to condone a person perpetuating a wrong act (in their eyes) as a minister of the church is anathema. It would be the same if a ministerial candidate was a chronic embezzler.

While it appears the issue seems to be about the rainbow community, actually it is about Biblical interpretation. And further, if you can pretend you are Alice going down the rabbit hole, we can also deeper and deeper and come to another underlying reason why this is a particularly hot potato for the church.

Not only does there seem for some people to be a biblical prohibition being broken here, also there are cultural mores at work. Early in Christianity, theologians picked up from the Greeks a list of dualisms. These deem some aspects of life good and some bad. This is assisted by certain readings of the Bible. That biblical support could be found, gave these Greek ideas more power. It is no accident that the aspects of life deemed good are those which depend on or promote what can be called 'right handed' power – power which is all about thrones and victory and might; what the contemporary reading calls straightline power. This is the kind of power Pilate was talking of when he asked Jesus if he was the king of the Jews. If Jesus had been a right handed King of the Jews then Pilate and he would have been locked in mortal combat as two competing kings in the temporal realm.

Since the involvement of Roman emperors in Christianity from the 4th and 5th centuries, we in the church, have been operating with right handed power. The courts and rules and regulations of churches are based on this power, on the, I believe mistaken, belief that this is the kind of power which God wields and would want us to yield. God in this right handed theology is the Almighty king of heaven – bigger and better than any other kind of powerful being. This kind of God appears to be the one talking back to Job, in the Hebrew Bible reading today though that too is a mistaken interpretation. (Look up the reflection on Job which I gave here on June 30 of this year).

In fact it didn't take as long as 300 years for right handed power to challenge Jesus' position. We see in the Gospel reading, James and John being seduced by the idea of having the two best seats in the house when it came to the after-life. 'One on either side of Jesus', they thought, 'would be just hunky-dory thank you very much.'

Jesus finds himself needing to explain his concept of power James and John and his other disciples who were mad with James and John – not, I suspect, because they thought James and John were wrong, but because they wished they had thought of booking a seat earlier!

Jesus lets his disciples know that in the world of left handed power, being a *servant* to those whom you lead is the best method of leadership. This leadership style got him killed in the end, so in the right-handed world of his time, Jesus was hardly a success! Left handed power is often quiet, gracious, kindhearted, compassionate and in a right handed world that kind of behaviours appears weak and ineffective.

Grace, kindness and compassion are associated with the Feminine – capital F. All men and all women contain the Feminine and all men and all women contain the Masculine. It is when both sides of us within us are allowed to flourish and grow, that we become whole, complete human beings. Which reminds me of another mistranslation of Scripture... we are not called to be 'perfect' as God is 'perfect'

but to be 'whole' or 'complete' as God is complete – still a difficult goal to reach but more possible than perfection which is a thoroughly right handed concept.

What we find in the church in general unfortunately is a preference for right handed kind of power. I suspect as the church declines more and more, that kind of right handed power will become more and more seductive. When we panic, we can fall into the trap of thinking that only furiously renewed right handed activity will get us out of the hole into which we can feel ourselves falling.

I believe quite a large part of the world is sick of, and cynical about, right handed power. Right handed power has ruined the planet and intends to keep on doing so. Right handed power spawns wars, encourages arms deals and nuclear armament. Right handed power generates leadership struggles and infighting. Right handed power that encourages our ego to think more of itself than it should. Right handed power kills journalists who practise free speech and creates political scandals over donations, affairs and secret recordings.

There is in us, as western society, a deep seated fear of the Feminine. This is the basis of the disputes about the place of the gay community within society, about the role of women, about the role of immigrants, about the seeking for peace, about the care of vulnerable children and about whether or not we need to care for the poor.

Without the Masculine aspect of us all to guide in setting practical remedies in place we are lost in a soup of wishy washy semi compassionate sentimentality, but without the Feminine our world is too hard edged and competitive.

We can see the fear of the Feminine in the hate speech used against gay men. Derogatory remarks you have heard often are all about the fear that at least one man in a gay partnership takes the traditionally female role. From outside the relationships redneck heterosexuals do not know which so all gay men are vilified.

I deeply regret actual people become the scapegoat in a situation which is far bigger than they are, a situation which goes far deeper than one or two or more relationships different from the majority.

This fear and rejection of the Feminine is really really bad news for the church. Not only does it creates a distasteful atmosphere for fine people, but for the health of our inner spiritual selves we need the Feminine to act, enabling the part psychologists call the soul to integrate with the part of us psychologists call spirit. We are all severely hampered in our movement towards full maturity if we ignore and reject the Feminine.

Even progressives can fall into this trap. In rejecting literal readings of the Bible and what we might think of as sentimental or superstitious ways of thinking, we can move into a purely Masculine intellectual space which is arid and disenchanting.

The good news is that it is possible to be intellectually honest *and* spiritually receptive. It is possible to use both our Masculine aspects and our Feminine aspects to enjoy the deeply symbolic, rich tapestry there within the Bible able to be rediscovered with a mythological eye. We will need to adjust to left handed power which seems weak, which seems like we are not intervening when we should, which values people above status, which forgives the Other for not being like us. We are not used to that style of being.

So it is confession time. I often slip into righthanded power thinking. I wanted to win at Assembly on the rules of the righthanded powerbrokers. I wanted Assembly to be convinced by our proposal. I wanted victory out in the open, seen and known by all. I wanted to be associated with right handed success like Margaret Mayman has been associated with the civil unions and same sex marriage cases here in NZ law and also with the two positions which the uniting Church of Australia has come to in its

wisdom. I wanted to be a right-handed winner too. I know deep inside that the books going out into the church, one by one and two by two, may in fact be a better though left-handed result. I may never know what someone thinks of the book. Neither I nor you may ever know what changes of minds happen out there. In a right-handed world that frustrates and upsets me. In a left-handed world it doesn't matter. Paradoxically, having lost, we may in fact be winning quietly and compassionately. It is important to get used to that way of thinking.

There are various stories of Jesus being asked who has had left behind on earth to carry on his work and the angels being incredulous that he had only left a bunch of 11 fishermen, a tax collector and some assorted others. The stories are obviously created to make a point but I do wonder if Jesus died worried that he hadn't got this left handed idea across well enough. Did he worry whether his message would be passed on intact or morph into something else like a huge game of Chinese whispers? And I wonder, were he here now, whether he might think his worse fears had been realised.

Last week, looking within to find the voice of the spirit deep within us was my message which in the end got a little swamped by my emotional reaction to the right-handed power of Assembly. Let us take some time this week again to look now within, seeing how we react to right handed and left-handed power, becoming aware of how we really act and feel.

First, in the next few moments of silence, consider the ways in your life when you had 'right handed' successes when people lauded you and thanked you and praised your actions. Think back to how you felt in those moments....

Now consider a time when you or others acted in a left-handed way when paradoxically as you or they acted in what seemed like a weak position, something very, very special happened. Enjoy the pleasure of those left-handed moments. Bring to mind how that felt.

Now ponder whether you think you are naturally attracted to right handed or left handed power. Ask yourself and the Spirit what you might need to do to welcome a more left handed life in the future.

So may it be AMEN

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