

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 21 Year C 2019

We do not have to look very far in the Scriptures to find difficult and controversial topics. Our faith *is not* one which shies away from complex and challenging ideas. And presenting the church as some sort of genteel, polite society, and our faith as mild and tame doesn't hold up when we actually bother to take the faith, and its scriptures seriously and on its own terms. Not on the terms we would like, but on its own. And one of the more challenging ideas the scriptures present us with is the idea of the punishment of God; the idea that God sometimes chastises us, his people. I say this is a difficult and challenging idea because in the last half century or so, it has been almost impossible in the mainstream churches to say anything about this idea. To even mention the idea of divine punishment risks us being seen as stupid and spiritually irresponsible. So, for decades now, it has been regarded as a no-go zone, to even suggest that something might be the result of God's punishment.

But. But we need to be honest about something. This idea, this theme, that God sometimes punishes his people, runs from beginning to end of the Bible. And not as a minor motif. But rather something that acts as a structuring framework to the entire biblical narrative. From the very start of the record, in Genesis, our very human condition - its struggles and pains and limitations - is seen as a consequence of the sin of our first parents. Noah's flood which destroys the earth and all life on it, save that which found its way into the ark, is told us being the result of God's punishment. The confusion of the languages, and that the peoples of the world are often at odds with each other is seen as a result of the presumption, the pride, found in the Tower of Babel. The fact that the Israelites wander the wilderness for forty years is presented to us as a result of their faithlessness. When Israel loses a battle, it is interpreted as a sign of God's judgment.

Why does Saul fall from grace? Why does he end up losing everything? Because he refused the divine command. Why is Eli killed? Why are his sons killed? Same thing: they were unfaithful to the Lord. Why is David's son, the son he had with Bathsheba, killed? Well, as the story is told to us, because of his infidelity and murder. Why is the kingdom divided into a northern kingdom and a southern kingdom? Because of Solomon losing his way, enticed by the gods of his many wives. Why is Israel taken away in exile into Babylon for 70 years? All the prophets agree: it's because of Israel's infidelity to God's covenant.

Now, we might say, well, yeah, that's fine for the Old Testament. And just sort of confirms all our suspicions why we shouldn't take the OT seriously. But. But... It's one God. One story of salvation. And the same thing *does* continue throughout the New Testament. The gospel today more than suggests an element of divine punishment with talk of weeping and grinding of teeth and of the narrow door on the road to salvation. To say nothing elsewhere of millstones around necks... In Paul's first Letter to the Corinthians: *many of you are sick and some of you have died because of your sacrificing to idols and dishonouring the eucharist*. In the Acts of the Apostles Ananias and Sapphira are struck dead. Why? Because of their sin! They held back money which they were supposed to give to the church. And the entire biblical narrative ends in the book of Revelation with a depiction of the destruction of the whole world because of human sin...

Now, yes, all these texts are complex. And, yes, we do have to be very careful in interpreting them. But at the very least, this little survey should show us, that this theme of the divine punishment cannot be dismissed as either incidental or peripheral. If we are going to take the bible on its own terms, then we have to at least take this seriously and try and get to grips with it. Now, what bothers us so much about this idea is that it seems to be a reversion to a primitive form of religion. It sounds a bit too much like the speculation of the ancient mythologists: the gods arbitrarily and capriciously coming down on us because of our misbehaviour. It seems to revert to a form of religion that is not worthy of Jesus who directs us toward a God of total love.

To be sure, we have to be very careful about this. We have to be careful that we not leap in and say to every unfortunate situation that this is a sign of God's punishment: *what have you done wrong?!* And it can easily slip into a form of spiritual abuse. At the same time – holding all this in tension – that at least according to the biblical witness say *this is a possibility*. But our invoking of this principle ought to be done very carefully and sensitively lest it awaken in people a sense of guilt and self-hatred.

So yes: an important topic, central to the bible. And, yes, one we have to be careful about. So, how do we make sense of this key idea? Well, the second reading today from Hebrews helps point the way. *Have you forgotten the encouraging words in which you are addressed as sons. Sons, do not disdain the discipline of the Lord. Nor lose heart when he reproveth you. For whom the Lord loves, he disciplines*. Now, that's the key! If you want to unlock this problem; here it is!

The writer to the Hebrews here is reaffirming the scriptural witness we've looked at: that God's punishment is real. But it is never capricious. Never arbitrary. Never malicious. Rather, God's punishment is presented to us as a type of discipline done out of love. What bothers us about so much of the ancient religions is that there, the involvement of the gods *does seem* to so arbitrary and cruel. That is not the case with the True God as revealed in scripture. With the true God, all his dealings are done in love. For love. Out of love. And loves takes many different forms. And sometimes in the form of discipline which is meant to move us in a better direction.

For whom the Lord loves, he disciplines. He scourges every son he receives. Endure your trials as the discipline of God who deals with you as sons. For what son is there whose father does not discipline? To make sense of this great theme, we have here the master metaphor of God throughout the bible: as the loving Father. And every parent amongst us here today will know the importance to discipline in love. And to those who never discipline a wayward child we would (rightly, I think) say, well there's a bad parent. Hoping just to be 'nice', we see as actually being kind of irresponsible. And so, some people have learnt the value of what is called 'tough love'. A child might have fallen into serious trouble: violence, drug abuse, criminal activity. And their parents have tried everything. They've tried the counselling, they've tried the soft approach. They've said, *we'll support you whatever you do darling, we'll always be here*. But nothing works. Finally, the parents have to draw the line. And it might mean forcing that child to deal with their problem. Not letting them back in the house, refusing to support them financially. Drawing a line and saying that out of love *we will allow you to feel the pain of what you've done*. The purpose hateful or to hurt. The purpose is discipline for the sake of love even if it looks like (and indeed it is) punishment.

Christian faith asserts that God has established the world according to his good purposes. There is a structure - *a God-given order* - to reality. Sin is the deliberate running against this God-given order. And that produces pain. When we run against God's purposes, he is not arbitrarily punishing us but like a parent showing tough love, he allows us to feel the pain of our sin so that it might bring us back to him. When our lives need to be realigned with God's good purposes our hardships and suffering can be God's way of allowing us to feel the pain our dysfunction; an opportunity to become aware of how we have become out-of-step.

This discipline an invitation to be led back to him, to depend on him, to trust wholly and completely on him who only and ever loves us. Amen.