

Deuteronomy 30. 15-20

1 Corinthians 3. 1-9

Gospel: Matthew 5. 21-37

I had an uncle Arthur. Didn't everyone have an uncle Arthur? Uncle Arthur was an old fashioned grocer. He ran a shop in Northcote with a counter where you were served. Each Thursday morning my mother would phone him and give him our grocery order for the week and then he would deliver the order on his way home that night. He would invariably arrive during dinner time while the seven of us were around the table. He would let himself in the front door and come into the kitchen, grocery box on his shoulder with his great belly preceding him.

Uncle Arthur, apart from being a grocer, was also friend of Father Christmas. As Christmas approached he would bring a little black book with him on Thursday nights. The groceries would be put down on the bench and he would then enquire whether we had been good; or not. And he would take notes in his little black book. What we got for Christmas depended, it seemed, on whether we had been good; or not.

The passage we have heard from the book of Deuteronomy comes from the end of that book; Deuteronomy is the last of the five books at the beginning of the Hebrew Scriptures, known as the Books of Moses. This passage is the culmination of the law. This is the imagined voice of Moses:

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses.

This image of God is what I am inclined to call the Father Christmas God. If you are good, you will be blessed. If you are not, you will be cursed and bad things will befall you. It is a prevalent image of God; one we may have been given as children or we may hear expressed when difficult circumstances befall someone. If something difficult happens to someone, do we find ourselves saying: *Oh, they don't deserve to suffer like that. What did he do to deserve that?* Misdemeanours and good behaviour noted down in God's little black book.

This blessing and curses understanding of God comes to us from the school of theology which gave us the book of Deuteronomy. This understanding of God is not the only understanding of the nature of God through the Hebrew scriptures; but it is a powerful one that takes root and corrodes our sense of confidence in the benevolence of the world. A corrosion that leads us to ask: *why?* Is God playing with us?

Is God for us whatever our circumstances? Or is God's approval of us, love toward us, dependent on whether we are good; or not? When something difficult happens to someone do we not at some level ask: why has this happened? What did I do wrong? What did they do wrong? It plays into our understanding of God's providence and what it might mean for God to be at work in the world. But can easily mutate into a sense of God the puppet-master; we the hapless puppets. Many find this picture of God quite unpalatable; but find it lurking within.

Together with this image of God in the Hebrew scriptures there is also an image of the God which upsets the view of the God who blesses us only when we are good: this is the God who sends the rain on the just and the unjust. There is also the God of the prophets who sees injustice and longs for release of the captives and the downtrodden. The tradition Jesus seems to stand in. Does this mean that there are multiple Gods? Well, no.

When we look at the Hebrew Scriptures and indeed the Christian scriptures the image of God is not a consistent image. This is because the long arc of the scriptures are the record of the Jewish struggle to understand the nature of God. One of the great perversions of the understanding of scripture has been the insistence that the scriptures do not contradict themselves. This is really something of a deception and an invitation to prevent us from asking probing questions about what we read. And it is a failure to understand the diverse nature of this collection of texts; the writing of which spans more than an 800 year period. This is without counting the oral tradition which was the basis of the writing of these texts. If we think about 800 years ago from now we find ourselves in the 12th Century. We have little in common with people in the 12th C; certainly their world view.

The way that the Hebrew and Christian scriptures *do* hold together is because they are the account of one people's endeavour to fathom the nature of God. And these texts hold together *both* the understandings and the misunderstandings. They hold the image of a vengeful, exclusive, nationalist God and the utterly inclusive God and father of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is trite and misleading to suggest that the picture of God that these texts offer us is consistent. What they do offer us is the account of the struggle to understand the nature of God through the eyes of the human condition. It is the account of huma's asking the question: is God in this, or not? Does God condone this behaviour; or not? If we are to engage with these ancient texts with all our heart and mind and soul we have to accept the task of, like Jacob, struggling with God. Many find this too difficult. Too many would have us rather adopt a neatly packaged image of God.

Scripture throws us a personal task: to struggle with God in all the light and dark, the pain and joy, all the moral ambiguity of our lives; to ask is God in this or not; and to seek the sense that we are known and blessed by God.

In parts of the church and at various times through the past 2000 years there has been a discounting a devaluing, even a discarding of the Hebrew scriptures. It's driven by the complex struggle to be able to reconcile some of the images of God in the Hebrew Scriptures with the face of God which Jesus shows to us. One ancient heresy, known as Marcionism, suggested that the God of the Hebrew scriptures and the God of Jesus Christ, were two different Gods and so the Hebrew scriptures and their God could be relegated to the rubbish heap. Be abolished

But when we look to the words of Jesus in the sermon on the Mount we find we cannot do this; that there is something essential that is not to be done away with. Particularly for Matthew's gospel, the gospel most deeply steeped in Jesus' Jewish heritage, who Jesus was and what he had to teach was the fulfilment of what had gone before. We heard Jesus say to the disciples last week: *Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil.*

Next Sunday we mark the Transfiguration; where Jesus goes up the mountain and is transfigured and his appearance becomes radiant. He is joined by Moses and Elijah. Moses representing the law and Elijah representing the prophets. They speak with him about the what the gospel writers in Greek call the exodus he is about to achieve; the liberation he is soon to bring about. Jesus will bring to fulfilment both the law and the prophets in the liberation of the cross.

Matthew's Jesus has a strong connection with the history and the longings of the Jewish people. Matthew has his perspective; as Mark and Luke and John have theirs. Not one of them is right; or historically accurate. They are not histories; or eye witness accounts but they seek to say some things about how this person Jesus shows the face of God. To say some things about how all that had gone before in the life of Israel was fulfilled in him.

All that said, today's Gospel is hard. *You have heard it said; but I say.* Strict adherence of the law is not enough. What Jesus calls the disciples to is a heart-felt obedience to the law.

The church proclaims that our understanding of God comes to fruition in Jesus Christ. That Jesus is *true God from true God*. God in flesh and blood, who could be seen and heard and touched and smelt. The perfect, eternal God in the frailty of a human life. Emmanuel; God with us. And we proclaim that in the Holy spirit God continues to be with us; embodied in each other. This is implicit in the last judgement question in the Gospel of Matthew to those who would see themselves as Jesus followers *just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.*"

The coming of God in the person of Jesus has unleashed a mystery of cosmic proportions where we are invited to see God present in all things: in each other, most especially in the least of these; in all creatures, in the beauty of the earth.

The psalm set for today Psalm 119

Teach me, O Lord, the way of your statutes,
and I will observe it to the end.

³⁴ Give me understanding, that I may keep your law
and observe it with my whole heart.

³⁵ Lead me in the path of your commandments,
for I delight in it.

May it be so for us.

Andrew Boyle