

MAY 22, 2016

SERVICE

Musician:

Veronica Rutowicz

Hymns:

No. 33, v. 1, 4 Gib die Weisheit meiner Seele...

No. 1, v. 1, 9 Trachtet ruft mit ernstem Worte...

Text:

**Luke 12:51-53 (augmented from Matthew 10)
("Jesus as the cause of division")**

There are many, many passages in the Bible that totally baffle me! But there are only few that baffle me and at the same time annoy me! And as I was writing this service, two such slightly annoying stories suddenly fell into place. They are suitable as a preface for today's text. The first problematic story is that of the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge. Eating this fruit was such a heinous transgression that God ejected Adam and Eve from paradise for ever! What was this tree of knowledge and its fruit? Did God really want humanity to be unintelligent and unthinking? Creatures of habit and instinct alone, like the other animals? If not, if he wanted us to be intelligent, that's baffling. Why forbid the fruit? Yes, that's even more baffling and somewhat annoying or at least disappointing – why not intelligent? I would say hooray for Eve!

The second problem is the frequent comparison between sheep – good – and goats – bad. These two problems appear to be related, because in both

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cases thinking appears to be sinful or evil. Sheep are unthinking and mindless – a mental vacuum wrapped in wool; while goats have some will – usually seen as obstinate, resulting from a modicum of intelligence perhaps. They have horns like the proverbial devil. At the final judgement of humanity, the sheep will be separated from the goats – that is the image I find mildly annoying because I would infinitely prefer to be a goat than a sheep mindlessly following some leader, at the head of the herd, to who knows where. Eating the fruit from the tree of knowledge did not give humanity actual knowledge; not even simply access to knowledge – i.e. via intellect. I think that it did give humanity an unquenchable thirst for knowledge. We have an overwhelming drive, a literally terrible drive to know, to find answers, to seek certainty. This drive has made us what we are today, and we have made the world what it is today. But the cost in suffering, pain, death and destruction has been truly huge! There is clearly an upside as well as a downside to this insatiable need to know, and we could well ask ourselves whether humanity was ready for this responsibility. God clearly didn't think so!

In acquiring this drive for knowledge, humanity lost something – in addition to paradise, we lost our natural in-born capacity for faith. Not faith in the cosmos, faith in karma, faith in a particular God – those are all based on constructs, logic and reasoning. But rather generic, inherent faith – the ability to let go of thought and logic, weighing pros and cons and to just trust, accept unquestioningly,

unflinchingly. I hate to say it, but sort of like sheep, trusting that everything is heading in the right direction. Sheep, of course, are a metaphor for innate faith and trust; goats are a metaphor for questioning and unacceptance – some form of reasoning. And the comparison should not be pushed beyond that one single characteristic. Any further comparison can only lead to confusion – and as for me – mild annoyance. After all, sheep are not inherently righteous; nor are goats inherently sinful or evil!

In short, our quest and striving for knowledge comes at the cost of a loss of innate faith and trust. We are all on a path, not just to the unknown, but to the unknowable! And each one of us will reach that point where knowledge will fail us and faith or trust is the only thing left to us – in the end, all we can do is proceed like a proverbial sheep.

Now I want to turn to our actual text for today's service. Most Christians see Jesus as the embodiment of compassion – a man who loved the world and everyone and everything in it; the sort of man who could say:

Blessed are the gentle, the meek,
They will inherit the earth...
And blessed are the peacemakers,
God will call them His children.

But this man also said (and this is today's text):

Luke 12:51

I have come to set fire to the earth...
Do you suppose I came to establish peace on the earth?
No indeed, I have come to bring dissension.

Matth. 10:34

I have not come to bring peace but a sword.

Luke 12:52-53

From now on, a family of five will be divided,

three against two, and two against three;
father against son and son against father,
mother against daughter
and daughter against mother,
mother-in-law against daughter-in-law
and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.

Matth. 10:36

... and a man will find his enemies under his own roof.

How can we reconcile this outburst with our traditional image of a loving Jesus? Easy! Our simple-minded Sunday School image of Jesus is wrong. Or maybe not wrong so much as incomplete.

There are stories in the Gospels – especially where Jesus is dealing with the religious leadership – that portray him variously as impatient, intolerant, verbally abusive and physically aggressive. And as we will see from today's text, we can add ruthless to this list of less loving characteristics. Ruthless is the exact opposite of compassionate. How is this possible? How can we reconcile this apparent paradox?

At this point I want to remind ourselves that we use texts, both from the Old Testament and the New, to stimulate our thinking about religious and spiritual issues, as well as moral and ethical questions; and also in the hope of getting some glimmer of insight that may help us to live our lives a little better. For this purpose we need accuracy.

When we analyse a biblical text, it is important to consider first and foremost its context within the book from which it was taken; the purpose of the book; the audience at which it was aimed; the religious, political, economic and social conditions of that audience; the historical/literary source of the ideas presented. When we do all that, there is a

chance that we might discover the original message of intent of the text. On the other hand, if we don't do that – if we read a text in isolation, we might indeed find a message on the surface but one not actually intended by the authors. Our interpretation might be comforting, but a lie.

In today's text, Jesus describes three levels of strife that he will cause – or, more correctly, that will accompany his activity. Locally, among people who would normally live in harmony – the family – there will be disagreements. This is due to Jesus' message, which requires a radical change in attitude. This is necessary because of the corruption of temple worship by centuries of misinterpretation and misrepresentation of the law. Jesus advocates a return to the basic, the original intent of the law. An upheaval of the status quo of this extent will always cause division. But that is hardly setting the world on fire! In fact, Jesus' words about dissension within the family are almost a quote from the Prophet Micah (7:6) – an apocalyptic book predicting the appearance of the Messiah.

Bringing fire and the sword to the world makes that connection with Jesus because the Messiah is the precursor of the apocalypse – the final judgement of humanity – the end of the world. That is his function! The appearance of the Messiah is traditionally accompanied by escalating problems: local dissension, national upheaval and revolt, international wars, global catastrophes and cosmic upheaval. Although at this point in Luke's story, Jesus has not yet been revealed as the Messiah, Luke seems to be softening up his readers by hinting at the coming revelation.

Our text is an apocalyptic text – hugely more far-reaching than simple familial tiffs and disagreements! Jesus, of course, ultimately reveals himself as the Messiah – the precursor of the apocalypse. It was the function of the Messiah to prepare people for their judgement – to teach them

how to achieve redemption. And this is the sole purpose of all of Jesus' teaching! For Christians Jesus was definitely the Messiah (for Jews he was not). It is quite clear from the New Testament that early Christians believed in an imminent judgement. The exact time of the apocalypse was not known – even Jesus did not know it. And he said that it was explicitly not supposed to be known! However, this has not prevented dozens of men, both Jews and Christians through history – every 50 years or so since the time of Jesus – to arrogantly predict a date! It is still happening today – even in Australia! It is driven by mankind's overwhelming need for answers, for certainty – our need to know!

In Judaism, there are two schools of thought about the apocalypse:

Firstly, there is the "horizontal" model – where world history continues to unfold naturally and the Messiah will be a worldly ruler who will appear once humanity is ready for him – then all individuals will have developed their full "godly" potential. The Messiah will rule over a utopian reality on earth. Looking around us today, we realise that this is not likely to happen very soon. I would view this model as a means of removing the judgement and its stresses from our immediate concern, making it a theoretical possibility of the distant future. Nothing we need to worry about! But a real, tangible reward at the end. The Messiah is in the future.

The second view of the apocalypse is the "vertical" process – and this is the one adopted by Christianity – of necessity because our Messiah has already come! In this model, the apocalypse represents the end of earthly history. It is preceded by appropriate extreme violence on all scales – individual to cosmic. The Messiah will deliver teachings that prepare humanity for the judgement. He will also be the judge! (We ought to add this fact to our image of Jesus.) He will separate the righteous for spiritual existence in heaven (above)

from the rest for everlasting hellfire (below) – “vertical”. This is the scenario we have inherited from the Christian Church. Throughout history, from the time of Jesus, the apocalypse has been thought to be imminent. It has always been thought to come suddenly and unexpectedly. In fact, the main thrust of Jesus’ message, as well as that of all the prophets, is preparedness for judgement. They pointed out the Jewish nation’s failings and said “change, or else”! Repent!

Now why am I spending so much time on this ancient fantasy – this fantastic myth, the apocalypse that most modern people couldn’t give two hoots about (other than as a blockbuster movie theme)? The reason is, of course, that our community is here today because of the apocalyptic expectations of our founders!

Johann Bengel, an 18th century Lutheran theologian, was instrumental in shaping Württemberg Pietism. He predicted the apocalypse for 1836. Christoph Hoffmann’s father was a staunch follower of Bengel. Christoph Hoffmann therefore grew up in an atmosphere of expectancy – that the world would end in 1836, when he himself was 21 years old! Conditions in Europe were most certainly sufficiently upheaved to support this fear, this expectation – revolutions, wars, rapid industrialisation with its human exploitation, the complete political reorganisation of Europe because of Napoleon, religious ferment, including Pietism itself; modern biblical criticism based on history and language “undermining” faith. The opening line of the Templer manifesto summarises the mood of the time:

“Angesichts der allgemeinen Zerrüttung der Menschen...” is how it starts
– in view of the general disruption or disorientation of mankind...

Of course, the world did not end in 1836, and Hoffmann pondered the fact and thought long and

hard about prophecy and judgement. As a result, the Templer settlements were established in the Holy Land as models of “Christian” communities. At least that was the aim: not ramming dogma down people’s throats through missionary activity, but inspiring them through example! Much has changed over the 1½ centuries since that time – but the basics, the fundamental tenet, is actually still there. We are fortunate to have inherited a truly enlightened and intensely practical attitude towards the apocalypse, the final judgement. Our founders, and those who came after them, realised the obvious futility of putting life on hold, and waiting expectantly for some form of end, either in fear or with arrogant optimism. Instead, they took to heart the primary message of the prophets, and of Jesus himself, who all emphasised preparation rather than timing and fearful expectation; a message often ignored throughout history. Our preparation consists of maintaining a truly “Christian” community to the best of our ability. A community in which both individually and communally the values espoused by Jesus, as well as his pragmatic teaching about life, are applied at all times, to everything in our daily lives – again to the best of our abilities.

We, today, are dealing with the consequences of the actions and decisions of past generations. That is how history works. In the same way, future generations will be dealing with the consequences of our actions, our interactions with each other and the environment, and our decisions. But because of the way we try to live, we hope the future consequences of our existence will be generally positive or even beneficial.

Christoph Hoffmann said all of this in his 4th Circular Letter of 1879. There he called us the “Community of Christ”. I must say that I feel rather uncomfortable with that label – it is very open to misinterpretation. I would prefer a more descriptive but more cumbersome “Community living according to the teaching of Jesus”.

I will end with a short quote from Christoph Hoffmann, freely translated:

“The final victory of the community of Christ will be the result of the work of those who have gone before. Whoever wants to participate in the Kingdom of God must join the ranks of those who work for it and must obey the spirit of Christ.”

Still good advice today!