

July 5 2009

Sunday 14B (off RCL)

Sermon notes on Ephesians 2.1-10

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More than forty years ago now there opened, first in Italy and then in the U.S., a film, the title of which has become a catch-phrase in common speech: *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*. It was a so-called "spaghetti western", and "the Good", "the Bad" and "the Ugly" designated the three main characters, each heading towards the same stash of gold buried in a grave in an old cemetery, and each ruthless as he makes his way towards that goal; "good", "bad" and "ugly" are certainly relative terms in this view of the world!

Now, the film itself isn't my interest this morning so much as the title catch-phrase title, for it seems to me that in our reading from Ephesians today there is a Good, a Bad and an Ugly to found, at least in the way in which Paul's language seems to be received these days.

The "Good" is the easiest to identify. This is the God who is "rich in mercy", who "by grace" and "not the result of works", "out of the great love with which he has loved us", saves those who are lost. This is our loving grandfather in heaven, benevolent, easy-going and forgiving.

The "Bad" is a little more subtle, but I would equate it with what we might call the cosmology Paul seems to espouse here. He speaks of "the ruler of the power of the air", and a "spirit at work" among us. The "bad" in this is that it is a view of the world along lines we imagine ourselves to have grown out of. From this distance in time Paul's world, with its powers and spirits, seems quaint and quite unscientific.

The "Ugly" I would ascribe to the understanding of the human person we strike here. Paul speaks of the human being as "dead through ... trespasses and sins", living "in the passions of [the] flesh", the "sons of disobedience"¹, "by nature children of wrath". This is not a very appealing picture and, as it stands, one largely rejected in and out of the church.

So the Good, the Bad and Ugly, on this reading, correspond to Paul's pictures of God, the world, and the human person. Now, to the extent that we read or hear Paul like this, we have *misunderstood* him, but the point of raising the matter in this way is to draw attention to the way in which he – and much else of the New Testament – *is* too often understood, as a matter of course.

It is, of course, possible by means of sheer will to hold this unholy trinity of ideas in our heart, as if they were three things on a list which we have to believe, and so we will. This does no justice to Paul but, from the believer's point of view, at least it looks and feels pious.

But it is more likely that we will discriminate between these three and choose the good over the bad and the ugly, for is this not a natural course to take? Thus, we will embrace the God of "love" who has embraced *us* by grace. Of course, this approach, while it adores the idea of grace, has some difficulty with the language of salvation and mercy, because these two notions still imply that we can't quite get rid of the ugly – that we are in some ways not loveable in ourselves. But God is, here, intended to be more the God who "loves" than the God who forgives or has mercy. We claim the good, but not the ugly, and there develops an almost childish assertion that there is *only* good, and that we don't need to acknowledge the bad. Much more consistent – if not actually any more rational in her account of human existence – is the unbeliever (including the so-called atheist), who at least dispenses with the Good as well as the Bad and the Ugly. All three are recognised as ruthless killers of the human spirit and, as such, all three are well left behind.

What, then, to make of Paul's account of ourselves in the world before God, in this foreign little piece from his ancient letter? How do we reconcile our understanding of the world with his, in which there is a "ruler of the power of the air?" How do we reconcile our understanding of ourselves and our potential with his apparent pessimism about human character? Can the good and the bad and the ugly to be reconciled in a way which will make not only good gospel sense, but simply *good sense* – of us, and of the world, and of God?

A full answer would take much more time than we have today, but for a shorter answer we might take a lead from the last verse of this morning's reading:

"For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life".

There are two things I want to draw attention to here. The first is that, in the Greek of the text, the emphasis of this sentence falls on the "he": "For we are what *he* has made us..." – translated differently, "*by him* we are...". The contrast being drawn here is between what we make of ourselves and our world (things of which we might "boast" – see v.9), and what in fact we actually are if, in our true character, we spring from God.

The second thing to note is the emphasis on being "made" – our nature as *creat-ures*: "... *he* has made us, *created* in Christ Jesus...". Now, in response to the word "creation" here we have to drive all anxieties about modern science and the book of Genesis out of our heads. Biblical talk of creation is not cosmogony – talk of the origin of the world – but cosmology, talk of the nature of the world. These two ideas are necessarily fused in modern

¹ A literal translation of NRSV's v2: "those who are disobedient".

scientific thought, but they are then typically *confused* when we try to compare scriptural talk about creation with the discoveries of science.

The word “creation” in the scriptures refers not so much to the *origin* of the world as it does to the *nature* or *character* of the world. The point of the creation story of Genesis 1 is not to explain where the world comes from but what it *is* or, more pointedly for us – what it is *not*. What the world is and is not is indicated by the notion of separation in the very idea of creation: the world is not God.

That might seem quite obvious to declare, but in practice it is extraordinarily difficult to *live*, and this brings us back to the bad and the ugly. It is when worldly things take on divine significance – when we make gods of things that are not gods – that the bad and the ugly arise. When Paul talks of “the ruler of the power of the air” (v2) and of good works we might do in order to boast (v8f), he is not being unscientific or pessimistic, but giving a specifically Christianly theological account of what happens when this particular God drops out of the picture: such things as “the power of the air” and “good works” are examples of ordinary worldly things taking on the dimensions of the divine, and so becoming grotesque.

Of course, few moderns give much credence to the idea of spirits wafting about causing us to do this or that thing, but neither is that the point of Paul’s language here. The “powers” which might have us in their grip are not otherworldly but precisely *this-worldly*, yet accorded divine status. Consider ideas and realities past and present which hold or have held us tightly in their grip: notions of human worth according to race, religion, gender or age; or our own personal histories – what was done to us, or not done to us, which now determines our actions and responses in ways of which we are quite unconscious; or the weight of cultural mores: who may talk to whom, knowing one’s place, what is or is not honourable; or the influence of political and economic systems. And consider how often the injustice we’ve come to see in such realities is justified by reference to divine ordinance and will. This dynamic can be very obvious, or very subtle. It is easy to ridicule, for example, the blatant self-deification of the leader of North Korea and others of that ilk, and yet to miss the way our western rhetoric of “freedom” draws on just as dangerous divine justifications in the talk of the pious and the impious alike.

The Swiss theologian Gerhard Ebeling once observed that theology is necessary because the human being is a fanatic. That is to say, we are prone to fanaticise the world – to turn a bit of it into the presence of God, whether that bit be an ordering which is there for our well-being – such as the economy or our social rules of engagement – or whether it be our own personal achievements. It is this fanaticism for the things of the world which gives rise to the bad and the ugly, for the bad and the ugly are simply creaturely things which been turned into divinity, the denial of their character – and ours – as creatures.

Now, given the time we’ve *not* got to pursue this much further, I need wind up, and will do so by picking up the significance of that emphasis on “he” we noted in that last verse of our passage: “we are what *he* has made us...”

This is a simple and uncomplicated offer not of some doctrine of creation, but of the possibility of a life which is free from the disorder which our fanaticisms bring with them. Such a life begins with being *made*, or *remade*, and not with what *we* have made of ourselves or our world. For we *are* fanatics, and we will worship things which are themselves only creaturely, and so in the end fail to be ourselves, and reduce others around us.

Our calling, and so our humanity, to cast it in the negative, is found in that we are called not to be God. There remains a mutually defining *relationship* between the creature and the creator, but the two are not confused. As a husband is not a wife, and yet needs a wife to be a husband, and as a daughter is not a mother but needs a mother to be a daughter, so are the creature and the creator related. The one becomes what it is in its proper relationship to the other.²

If what matters is not what we make of ourselves and the world, but what this God will make of us, then our life becomes gift, and not a burden to be carried, and the world becomes open possibility and not some divinely-ordered constraint or “power of the air”. I suspect that honesty would place most of us, on the terms as I’ve described them, among the bad and the ugly. For these Paul speaks not only of creation but of re-creation – a starting again, life out of deathliness, a return to our humanity.

This, it seems to me, is a thought and an offer worth entertaining, for surely this world needs fewer gods and more humanity. The question is whether a human being which makes *itself* is capable of getting itself right, or will in the end turn itself into yet another god. The evidence to date would suggest that the latter is the more likely, in so far as “all power corrupts”.

It is worth considering then whether Paul, for all the apparent ugliness and badness of his worldview, in fact sees more clearly than we do with all the marvellous things we now know. Perhaps it seems foolish or quaint to suggest in this age that we need a God in order to be more human. But the great irony is that, whether the suggestion is made or not, we will make the gods anyway. Paul simply points to which of the gods will actually work.

By the grace of God, and for our own greater humanity, may more people give heed to his suggestion. Amen.

² Ultimately we would have to say this the other way around: that worldly relationships take their proper character from the proper relationship of creator and creature, which itself takes its character from the relationship of the Father to the Son. This last step is the key to making sense of the repeated “in Christ” phrases to be found in this passage – to be “in Christ” is to be to God as the Son is to the Father, is to be “created”.