

16 August 2009

Sunday 20B (off RCL)

Sermon notes on Ephesians 4.1-16

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Last Tuesday night, because we had decided to cancel the Kew Church Council meeting for lack of pressing business, I took advantage and did something I've not previously been able to do on that night of the month, which was to attend one of the monthly lectures put on by the Atheist Society in East Melbourne. The lecture was on the theme "Religion and Science", and it was not a happy experience! The thing which struck me most sharply was a growing despair in myself as to whether it is in fact possible to have a conversation on such matters, given the extraordinarily hard line held by many, including the speaker that night, as to just what the problem is and so just what needs to be discussed.

I doubt I could do justice to what was a rather long lecture, and so won't try to relate his many points here, but I think that it is possible to summarise the basic assumptions which drove the whole diatribe. These were,

1. that God is held by believers to be the biggest thing among all the things in the world and, as part of the world, is therefore a reality which ought to lend itself to empirical testing,
2. that God is invoked by believers to explain aspects of the world and,
3. that God is therefore held by believers to be "necessary" for the world to be as it is.

Part of the reason these assumptions appear in such debates is that, in fact, many believers to hold that God is the biggest thing, is needed for meaning and so is "necessary". Yet, it seems to me that none of these assumptions have much to do with "religious" belief at all – or, at least, with Christian belief.

Now I don't want to argue the point on these things this morning, but simply to note how difficult it is to have a conversation when there is yet no agreement as to what it is which is to be discussed. In the course of the "discussion" which followed the lecture I attempted to make what seemed to me to be the simplest of modifications to what the word "God" might mean, in order that we might at least disagree about the same thing. In his response, the problem wasn't that the speaker didn't agree with me, so much as that he simply could not hear that I was saying

something different to what he thought I should say as a "religious" person.

Now, I *am* nearly over all that trauma now, and won't say much more about it, but I *was* surprised to discover how that exchange suddenly illuminated what Paul is driving at in this passage this morning. For I confess that I had originally found the passage quite obscure, beginning as it does with all the "one-nesses", then wandering to the gifts, then to "every wind of doctrine", then to our incorporation into Christ. Until Tuesday night it seemed to me that it would be necessary just to pluck one thought out and to leave the rest to another time. But the frustrations of the lecture revealed the surprising unity to Paul's thought and expression here, and its continuity with all which has been said in the epistle up to this point.

To explain this, one further thing needs to be said about the character of that "Religion and Science" presentation. Much of what passes for critique of religion these days, and I would include all recent manifestations of rabid atheism in this selection, is its surprisingly narrowly focus. In particular, it lacks a self-consciousness or self-awareness of its own place in the "Great Conversation", and offers very little in the way of realistic alternatives to what it criticises, particularly in the fields of ethics and politics. Our critics on Tuesday night had very strong ideas about what was right *for them* – what they did or did not believe, but, it seemed to me, lacked the courage to step beyond that *personal* position to a broader "how *we* should then live".

Now, it seems at one level to be very humble and reasonable to do this – to hold my personal beliefs and not to impose these upon others, but simply to resist others imposing their beliefs on me. But such an approach leaves an extraordinary vacuum in the world, because, regardless of the correctness or sincerity of what I believe, and the freedom which I think I have in believing it, there is always something bigger going on the world, within which I'm caught. This "something bigger" might be a reality as mundane as the weather, or something as insidious and difficult to pinpoint as the broad worldviews and patterns of thought which have been bequeathed to us by the current manifestation of human society. If, as we seek to speak of ourselves and God, we reduce everything to simply "this is what I believe" and "that is what you believe", we blind ourselves to

the fact that we still actually live together, and so still have in common something which hasn't entered into our conversation. As different as we might be from each other, there is *always* something the same. As far as the debate about God and the world, religion and science, belief and unbelief goes, it is this sameness which really matters, and is properly the realm of God, and not the difference.

To put it most simply, Christians *have* to be Christians in their relationships to others around them, they are not Christians in their own heads or on Sundays and citizens or "good people" in every other aspect of their lives. There is nothing "private" about speaking of God.

It is this which Paul has understood, and which he declares in our reading this morning. Paul's account of our knowing of God, and our being together, takes the broadest sweep. Let's look first to the flow of the passage. He begins with the exhortation:

"...lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ² with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, ³ making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

This unity – this "bond of peace" – comes from God himself: one body of human beings in one Spirit holding to one hope in one Lord, one faith expressed in one baptism, all deriving from the one God and Father of all (v4-6). He then moves to the diversity of gifts with which God has blessed the church, focusing particularly on those gifts of teaching and preaching and expounding the gospel (apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers). These ministries, however, are noted not because they are more important than others, but because of their particular function in

"building up the body of Christ, ¹³ until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ"

There are alternative teachings and possibilities, of course, but these are excluded, not because they are "wrong" as such, but more importantly because they are inadequate to the task of joining and knitting human beings together as a single body, each part working properly, promoting the body's growth in building itself up in love (v.16).

What I really missed on Tuesday night was not a whole-hearted embrace of Christian teaching; I'm not sure that it would be desirable for the

average atheist suddenly to be convinced that God did "exist" and was "necessary", and so on. This would just perpetuate the problem, now from the side of belief instead of unbelief. Rather, what was missing there was a way of speaking of our knowing and being which suggested how such a humanity unified in love as Paul envisions might even be possible, or even gave an adequate account of what ails us as creatures in our relationships with each other. What Paul first declares is what we know well enough already – the world is lacking in love, a lack which manifests in pain and strife between us. But he declares, secondly, just how deep-rooted this problem actually goes. The assumption of the average critic of religion is that, without the divisiveness which religion brings, the world would finally sort itself out.

This is not only a naïve thought but a dangerous one, because whenever we speak of ourselves, whether as believers or unbelievers, there are always things like gods lurking in the background, whether we name them "God" or not. To be blind to the religious character of secular powers is simply to be ready for re-enslavement once the religions have been abolished. But Paul begins with a revelation of just how deep the problem runs. At the heart of Christian belief is a story of the rejection, as it happens, of one who was thought to be an unbeliever and so worthless for the cause of God, and yet who proved to be the most important of all. It was for the sake of "belief" – so called – that God was crucified. This being the case, it is not enough simply to argue about God, for even believers usually don't get it. While God matters, we do too, and what it means to live together and how God might make that possible, also have a share in the heart of the matter.

And so Paul exhorts us most earnestly: lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called. The heart of the matter is the life we lead, recognising at the same time that that life is impossible to live as we are called, if we think that that calling is simply about being "good" people. We are not only to be "good" but, to borrow from our psalmist this morning, to recognise that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. This "fear of the Lord" is not about being god-fearing in the old, moralistic sense, but about knowing the story which speaks of human failure and divine triumph, a triumph won by God that we might know the truth about ourselves, and so continue into life with greater insight into its challenges and opportunities. And the opportunity is an extraordinary one: living with each other, "with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

The test of faith will not be an argument about the existence or necessity of God. Faith is tested when we seek to live according to this calling, growing in understanding of what life together would have to look like if it were truly to be *life* in a world like this. The test of faith is our willingness to "maintain the unity of the Spirit".

For a vision of a humanity which casts into shadow our errors and confusions and divisions, and for the promised Spirit which works to establish this humanity in us today, thanks be to God, now and forever, Amen.