

10 October 2010

Sunday 28C

Sermon notes:

2 Timothy 2.8-15

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In our reading from 2 Timothy this morning Paul speaks of "...my gospel, for which I suffer hardship, even to the point of being chained like a criminal". There's a danger in reading texts like this on the relationship between faith and suffering, for we might be tempted to read the degree of suffering as a measure of the degree of faith and righteousness: the more one suffers, the closer one is to what it means to be a believer.

There is a strong religious tradition of *romanticising* persecution for one's beliefs. For there is glamour in dying the death of a martyr. There is a story about the third century Christian theologian Origen that, after encouraging his father to seek martyrdom for the faith, he was himself prevented from following his father's successful self-sacrifice because his mother hid his clothes. (Presumably, while being killed for being a Christian was a fate Origen could embrace, being seen naked in public was not). The glamour of such testimony distracts us from the more subtle ways faith might impact negatively on us today.

Last week we heard about a recent "religious knowledge survey" which revealed how poor grasp many Christians have on basic facts about our belief system and its history. I argued that, despite the comfort we might still take in our good morals and practices, an understanding of our beliefs is critical to being "religious" in any Christian sense. But, still, such knowledge cannot simply be a theoretical thing. What we have lost in relation to most of our theological doctrines is that whereas now they might simply not make a lot of sense to us, once they were also actually *offensive*. That is, they seriously challenged the social order in quite tangible ways. Paul is in prison as he writes to Timothy not merely because of what he "believed" but because of the implications of that belief for the society in which he lived. When, for example, Paul preached that gods made with human hands were not gods, the result was a riot instigated by the local god-making guild, who recognised that such theology challenged the livelihood they made from selling idols (Acts 19.21ff). There are many such "gods made by hands" in our world today.

To help make the point, I will play for you this morning a brief reflection by the theologian Stanley Hauerwas. Hauerwas is an American

Christian from the Mennonite tradition, and has written extensively and very provocatively on what it means to be a disciple of Jesus in the modern world.

[An edited transcript of Hauerwas' reflections]¹

[Opening question: What breaks your heart?]

... I think one of the most heart-breaking aspects of our lives today are young people desperate to have something to die for, and we're afraid to give it to them.

... I think, as a result, we turn them and ourselves into cynics, and cynicism kills.

The opposite to cynicism is hope. You know, you're not going to get out of life alive, and the great good news is that we've got something to live for, in a world in which you're not going to get out of life alive.

I say, if only we could produce interesting atheists today, but since we're not interesting believers we have a hell of a lot of trouble producing interesting people that deny God. Because the deepest enemy to Christianity is not atheism; it's sentimentality.

And sentimentality is seen most clearly in Christians' unwillingness to have their children suffer for their convictions. They just don't want to think that what it means to be a Christian you might have to pay some prices for.

Let them, for example, think about "being a Christian" as putting them at odds with war. And if it puts them at odds with war, then that means that they're going to be much less acceptable than they think they are. They may think being against abortion or something like that puts them in tension with the social order. But try being against war.

Or try being against greed! Christians often times think that they know what they're talking about in kinds of sexual issues because they know what lust looks like. But I think most forms of lust today

¹ The original film clip can be seen at http://www.theworkofthepeople.com/index.php?c_t=store.details&pid=V00797; or go to www.theworkofthepeople.com and type "Hauerwas into the Search box, press Enter and click on "Something to die for".

are really forms of greed, because you never get enough.

How to have our lives challenged by noticing that we're formed by greed in ways we don't even know how to name. What would greed look like? Two SUVs or something? We concentrate on sex because we think we know what it looks like when you get it wrong. We don't know what greed looks like, so we don't even notice it.

So how to recover a sense in which what it means to be a Christian could put us at some odds with the sentimentalities that determine what most people mean by morality?

It pisses me off that [because of] the accommodated form of Christianity that so possesses our lives, we hardly know what an alternative would look like.

There's a lot in this little sound bite – our parenting of our children, war, greed. And there's really only enough there to provoke interest – at least I hope that it provokes interest – and not quite enough to make entirely plain what he means.

I want to focus only on the contrast Hauerwas draws between true believing and what he calls sentimentality. The meaning of sentimentality in belief is hard to pin down except in contrast with what Hauerwas might call “interesting” believing the kind of believing which creates interesting unbelieving, rather than the laziness of the polemic which constitutes most modern atheism. Religious sentimentality is belief which makes little difference to our experience of the world *except to soften it*. Religious sentimentality is faith which makes the world an *easier* place for us to live in, which makes the world more enduring, more sensible.

This sentimentality is perhaps most obvious at the high festivals of our religious lives – at our baptisms, our weddings and our funerals. At our (infant) baptisms it is almost impossible to communicate or to understand that what we gather to mark is first of all not the *birth* of the lovely little thing in her mother's arms, but its death. Baptism is a drowning – a putting to death of something which the infant will yet become, before it happens, and a setting in place of something new, before it seems necessary. But who wants to feel the force of this in the midst of all the sentiment we feel about a new life in our midst? Yet this would more accurately reflect the gospel account of what it means to be human.

At our weddings we imagine that we come together to declare our love for each other, and

the so-called “love text” of 1 Corinthians is a favourite for all the nice things it says about what love is and isn't. And yet the New Testament does not celebrate human beings' love for each other. Quite to the contrary, it finds that we must be *commanded* to love each other. And the couple who dare to step up to the altar will not be asked by the minister “do you love him/her”, but “*will* you love her/him” How can we get into our sentimental heads that in a wedding ceremony we *command* the grinning couple to love each other? We command them to be faithful in circumstances better or worse, in sickness and health, in poverty and richness, the meaning of which we can barely understand at the time. Yet this would more accurately reflect the gospel account of what it means to be lovers.

And at our funerals we imagine that the primary thing we gather for is to give thanks for the life of the one we have lost, and to tell *her* story. Yet, at least within a funeral service which is also a service of Christian worship, this is in fact a secondary concern. There is certainly a place for remembering as one of us the one who is passed. But worship tells our story as a chapter within a much deeper and broader story, and it is that broader story which takes priority. Religious sentimentality enters here in the way in which our celebration of the goodness and lovability of the one we've lost becomes our assurance of her having graduated into eternal life. Death is then trivialised to a mere rite passage for the righteous into eternal life. Yet no small part of the Christian talk about resurrection is in fact to force us to take death much more seriously, and not to convince of life after we die. Eternal life as a reward for a good life is not resurrection but reincarnation, and the difference between the two is enormous. Yet much of the church's chatter about “life after death” is more akin to a belief in reincarnation than in resurrection.

Sentimental religion is religion which reaffirms what we already believe about ourselves – or want to believe – and simply gives it a religious veneer. We have always celebrated the birth of our children, the passion of lovers and the life well-lived. They have always spoken to us of what is good about ourselves as human beings, and rightly so. And so we easily mistake our religious rituals as being there to reinforce these feelings. Yet this is the basic drive of paganism – the stamping or sealing of the political and moral order. It is the most natural thing in the world, and it is *away from* this – perhaps away from this *alone* – that the gospel constantly calls us.

Paul is not in prison because the things he valued about himself were reinforced by his belief, or because he took comfort in his religion and good morals. He is there because he saw the contrasts. He extorts Timothy to “rightly explain the truth”. This is not a matter simply of

clarifying the doctrines and understanding the Christian theory of God. It is a matter of seeing where the story of Jesus challenges, contrasts and contradicts what we presume to be the truth about us, and calls us to a different truth. Hauerwas finished up by saying that because of the accommodated form of Christianity that so possesses our lives – the Christianity which accommodates or absorbs our mistakes about ourselves – we hardly know what an alternative would look like. He made the point with rather stronger language than we're used to hearing in this place. But this simply reflects that to confess that Jesus is Lord *is* strong language – it *is* the swearing of an oath, it is *blasphemy* against the gods of the prevailing order. We gather here simply to hear how it might be so that the lordship of Jesus blasphemes against our unexamined values and sentimentalities, and how that critique should be reflected in the way we live our lives.

However that reflection might take shape for us personally and as a community of faith, we can be sure that, in some way or another, it will bring us into conflict with the world and with each other and so cause us to suffer.

May God, in his grace, give us better hearing to hear when that might be necessary, and hearts willing to act when that Word is heard. Amen.