

17 October 2010

Sunday 29C

Sermon notes:

2 Timothy 3.14-4.5

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*ITCHING EARS*

*Jeremiah 31:27-34;*

*Luke 18:1-8;*

*2 tim. 3:14-4:5*

An explanation to start with. Two days ago, I was invited to preach at a service in the theological college where the custom is to use the lectionary for the coming Sunday. As a text for ministers in training, the epistle we have just read simply had to be the choice for that occasion:

'The time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but, having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths'. (2 Tim 4:3)

So the truth is that when Craig asked me to preach this morning, I simply couldn't - and I still can't - let that verse go. It is, of course, not simply a text for embryonic ministers. Perhaps, though, what we are about to attempt may prove to be overly ambitious. But here is something of what I offered the students, and equally - though somewhat tentatively - would like to offer to you. But it will be a demanding task for us all.

I began on Friday by stating the obvious - that this is not a bad text for those about to embark on the task of Christian ministry. If nothing else, it reminds us that the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the 2<sup>nd</sup> are not so far apart. The basic question, of course, is: What was the problem described then 'as wandering away into myths'? The commentaries tell us that it revolved around a major real competitor of the emerging faith - an all embracing phenomenon called Gnosticism, common to the world both of ancient Judaism as well as Hellenistic culture. Indeed, the word 'Gnostic' comes from the Greek word 'to know'. It is a word we encounter today in its negative form - as 'a-gnosticism'. That is to say, Gnostics claim to 'know'; agnostics are those who 'don't know'.

Scholarly opinion is divided as to the precise reference in this verse, whether the Gnostic myths were Jewish or Greek, but the undisputed fact is that in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century all the varieties of Gnostic systems on offer were subtle, sophisticated and audacious. Indeed, it would be no exaggeration to claim that Gnosticism represents the primal religion of the human race. Not surprisingly, therefore, Gnostics of every variety, then as now, invariably think of themselves as a religious elite - spiritually vital, and intellectually curious.

It is true, of course, that the particular *expressions* of this ancient Gnostic religion against which our text is warning are rare nowadays. But Gnostic *beliefs* and *attitudes* certainly are not, and they are not difficult to identify. So what was it and, more to the point, what is

it still? For our purposes, we must limit ourselves to describing two such varieties - one bearing on God, and the other concerning the understanding of the human person, each antithetical to Christian faith, and against which the warning of our text remains pertinent to our times.

Now at the heart of every Gnostic system is a view of reality which pits two opposing categories against each other. To use more technical language, Gnosticism always involves an unrelenting dualism - that is, two competing elements forever in contention.

1. The first dualism, and that which is basic to all Gnostic thought, is the *absolute separation* of God and the world. So profound is this hiatus that it is effectively unbridgeable, except by means of secret esoteric knowledge available only to the spiritually elite. For us today, it is crucial just at this point to recognise the Gnostic roots of today's advancing cultural atheism. The fact is that popular atheism is predicated on just this radical separation between God and the world, but now entertained negatively - that is to say, atheism contends that there simply is no God that can survive such a radically absolute divide. In other words, we might venture the thought that atheism is dressed up, terminal a-gnosticism - agnosticism in drag, as it were!

So what did, and does, the Gospel say to such radically bifurcated world views? Well, for a start, although Christian faith from the beginning shared a similar regard for the 'otherness' of God from the world - what the philosophers call 'transcendence' - it always insisted that though God and the world must always be *distinguished*, they must never be *separated* - a separation that all Gnostic systems require in principle. For example, not for nothing is John 3:16 the fundamental weapon against all forms of Gnosticism. The point is that we have to be aware of Christian faith's radical repudiation of this Gnostic dogma if we are truly to feel the force of the text: 'God so loved the world...'. Here it is: God and the world in the same breath - distinguished, but never to be separated.

Judaism had already got there first, of course, which is why it has always insisted on speaking of 'covenant' as its core belief. So the reading from Jeremiah today: 'I shall be your God, you will be my people', until Christian faith later became uncompromisingly incarnational in its insistence on the Word made flesh, when God and the world came so decisively together precisely on that covenantal foundation. How contrary this is to all Gnostic systems with their absolute divide between two worlds - a divide which only the spiritually initiated were able to penetrate, but not the common herd.

So much for the first and basic dualism.

2. Our second illustration has to do with what was thought to be true about us as human beings, and, here again, the ancient Gnostic presuppositions are everywhere around us - that human beings must be understood to exist *apart from* the world. In a Gnostic world, there is, essentially, no context for life together - there is only the individual whose lonely spiritual essence is trapped in the materiality of a body, so that only an individual 'journey within' will release one's essential identity. The contemporary form here is the now universal quest for some sort of 'spirituality'.

It is, of course, a great relief to the world to discover spirituality, since it finally releases moderns from the claim of 'religion'. So the mantra goes: 'I'm not religious, but I have my own spirituality'. Are we surprised that, in such a climate, 'church' is increasingly superfluous? The fact is that we all need to have our wits about us to detect the fundamental difference between the vanity fair of the plethora of competing Gnostic idolatries, and an authentic Christian spirituality. Here is as good an illustration of the matter as any:

Recently in the Sunday Age magazine, the writer was disconcerted to discover an unread copy of 'War and Peace' on her bookshelves.

'Holding on to these books,' she claimed, 'which no longer represent our ideas and beliefs, will block new ideas and opportunities from coming into your life'.

Other titles needing to be dispensed with included, predictably, the Bible, as well as all 1990's self help literature. Then this:

'On the flipside, its wonderfully heart skippingly liberating to shed old trappings and become alive to the essences you truly want to surround yourself with. It feels like letting go.'

In 2010, this is ancient Gnosticism, pure and unadulterated.

So there we have it. A glorious modern mythology predicated on two varieties of Gnostic dualisms – atheism and 'spirituality'. And with these, the wheel turns full circle, and the irony is complete: authentic Christian faith is now itself being described, even by influential quasi-theologians, as a collection of myths, obscuring the simple attractive historical figure of Jesus; an apparently seductive and daring hypothesis to those who like to think of themselves as 'progressive', but which is at least 150 years out of date. Regrettably, rebuttal of much that is currently popular has to be carried out on so many fronts, but this is the reality of the present situation in which ministers and people are being called to offer Christian ministry.

To this end, you recall that the larger reading not only describes the presenting problem; it is also constitutes a call:

'Proclaim the message, be persistent whether the time is favourable or unfavourable; convince, rebuke, and encourage with the utmost patience in teaching'.

What might it mean to proclaim the gospel in today's unfavourable world of secular Gnosticism?

I have suggested that if ancient Gnosticism could only achieve enlightenment by going up through metaphysical aeons; modern Gnosticism, after the cultural death of God, can only go down into the hidden recesses of the self, what Martin Luther nicely called 'Nabel schau', navel gazing, leaving the self desperately alone in an uncertain world, committed as our world is to an illusory anti-gospel of unremitting, and endlessly replaceable, individual choices.

Describing varieties of Gnosticism like this, we find ourselves rehearsing the gesture of a cross. The

extended arms of that cross point to infinities where human beings will, either sooner or later, inevitably lose themselves, compelled as we are to find solace whether by going up or down, or to a horizontal profusion of apparently inexhaustible post-modern possibilities - as far as the arms can reach.

The point, of course, is that at the intersection of these vertical and horizontal arms - at the crossroads defining every human pursuit promising salvation - the gospel assumes its defining shape. At the very centre of this cross hangs one of us, a victim of these myriad options, yet paradoxically, as one crowned in his absolute desertion. That is to say, the cross is the ultimate expression of the reconciliation of all the world's human hiding places - up or down, left or right.

Comprehending all this is what we have to find new language for in our day – a task requiring everything that our text is advocating - persistence certainly, but, not least, immense reserves of courage, not to speak of rigorous intellectual work, and that not just by Christian ministers, but equally by everyone who still wants to be seriously engaged. The cultural climate is certainly inhospitable - if not one of intensifying hostility, then clearly of demonstrable ignorance of what Christian faith is really about.

That fact is that, if pastors and people turn our backs on such an undertaking, the alarming question posed by the gospel today will undoubtedly prove to be the only one that ultimately matters. You recall it, in all its finality:

'When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith – on the earth?'