

Lent 2

Wash day or baking day...what's your theology?

Gen15: 1-12, 17-18; Luke13: 31-35

I am well old enough to remember life before washing machines. Monday wash day was a big event which consumed the whole day. The dolly tub, the mangle, the sheer physical effort that was needed to scrub away the ingrained dirt, the damp smell lingering in the air, and then the ritual of starching-Dad's collars and cuffs, the table linen, so that everything could be as pristine as possible. It was all pretty exhausting - getting dirty, keeping clean, were no trivial matters. And week after week, the same battle went on.

I have another memory- of baking day on Fridays. The aroma that filled the house so enticingly, the trays of my mother's wonderful scones, and cakes, and buns...ready for the weekend- the time of relaxation and family gatherings. A real sense of love and well-being.

These are evocative memories- but also brilliant images of Christian faith. It seems to me a tragedy that Christianity has largely preferred to proclaim a message of Monday washday rather than Friday baking day. We major on purity codes, rigorous cleansing, atonement theories- to placate a God whose love and approval we have to earn. We do not easily- or at all?- accept God's abundance, his overwhelming desire to care for us, to share table fellowship with us, to enjoy our company. So

often, it seems, there is an abundance of guilt and a scarcity of joy.

I think Jesus is deeply aware of this when he points out so sadly 'How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing.'

Where does this unwillingness come from?

I think we need to go back to the Garden, the Garden of Eden and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. On the face of it, wanting knowledge can hardly be a sin. Yet it has led human beings into a split universe, a judging frame of mind, a craving for explanations and certainty- what is good, what is bad, who is going to heaven, who to hell- we like to know because we want to be in control-and to know that we are right. But such desire for certainty prevents us being close to God who is known in the burning bush, the clouds of Sinai, the darkness of Calvary.

That's why God says, 'Don't do it. Don't eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil.' He wanted to protect us- from this hang-up about needing answers and explanations, from this dualistic mindset that is always either/or and never both/and. God wants us to be able to live with ambiguity, to bear the brokenness of everything, instead of insisting on dividing reality into good and bad all the time.

And that, I think, is a crucial insight for us to reflect on during Lent. We must acknowledge our own frailty, weakness, woundedness. Our wholeness comes from accepting our shadow side. This is true for every single one of us. If we don't own our own shadow we will project it onto someone else. The problem is not so much our flaws as our inability to admit them. Because we have this dualistic mindset we are always comparing, weighing up where we are in relation to others, defending ourselves and judging. It is worth reflecting that Jesus never seems upset by sinners- only by those who are not prepared to admit they are sinners!

All communities carry the shadow side- the judging and criticising and negativity that we can so easily be tempted to exercise. We can allow those tendencies to define us- and damage us- or we can live from the good that is present in us all as well, accepting each other with generosity rather than resentment and criticism. A true witnessing Christian community realises that we are all vulnerable and wounded people, we all need to give and to receive, and to share each other's burdens. It's Christian because it faithfully reflects God who sees and accepts all of it and is with us in all the unresolved tensions and failures and contradiction- because that is what incarnation means.

An honest community will live with opposites and difficulties and tensions without seeking to resolve everything- because maturity comes from learning to love the way God loves. Acceptance and forgiveness are at the heart of what it means to be community- the

gathered people of God. If we start off with our judging minds then love doesn't stand much chance.

God asks us to share with him in holding the contradictions and pain of the world- to embrace all the ambiguity and the uncertainty. It is the way of crucifixion. It is the way of holding the middle, not coming down on one side or the other but prepared for tension and paradox- trusting that that is the way to wholeness and redemption. God asks us to be patient.

We find it impossibly hard- and that, I think, is at the root of our unwillingness- to be loved and protected by God. It is easier to separate things, and categorise them- to resort to the dualism of what is acceptable and what is not acceptable, of abundance and scarcity, clean and dirty. And because we are committed to this way of thinking then we project this dualism onto God. Because we think we have to account for ourselves we assume that that is what God wants. We behave as if we need to change God's mind about us whereas the truth is we have to change our mind about God.

In his powerful poem, I Am the Great Sun, Charles Causley has expressed what I think Jesus must have been feeling as he grieves over Jerusalem.

I am the great sun, but you do not see me,
I am your husband, but you turn away.
I am the captive, but you do not free me,
I am the captain you will not obey.

I am the truth, but you will not believe me,
I am the city where you will not stay,
I am your wife, your child, but you will leave me,
I am the God to whom you will not pray.

I am your counsel, but you do not hear me,
I am the lover whom you will betray.
I am the victor, but you do not cheer me,
I am the holy dove whom you will slay.

I am your life, but if you will not name me,
Seal up your soul with tears and never blame me.

God is utterly committed to us and will never give up loving us. In the story we heard from Genesis God promises Abram that he will give him his deepest desire- what he wants more than anything in the world- an heir- and God binds himself to that promise with an extraordinary ritual. It is written in the blood –that kind of a promise- if it is broken God must submit to being butchered like the animals. Hugely costly, carried forward and fulfilled by Jesus- not because God breaks his promise but precisely because we keep breaking ours- and God bears all the cost, all the time. God keeps both sides of the bargain because we can't- or don't. God just continues to love us at even deeper levels, however much we fail, however much we get it wrong. Nothing can separate us from God's love. Nothing will deter God from what he has bound himself to -us. Nothing will deter Jesus from the journey he must make to Jerusalem- and the cross.

God simply gives himself to us- and we apparently are hard-wired to be unwilling, harbouring resentments against each other and against God; we would rather have logic and accounting, reward and punishment, the language of debt and satisfaction. We put in place certainty and what we think we know rather than living faith- not knowing and not needing to know, but trusting God and living the mystery and the intimate closeness of union which flows from a loving heart. We choose Monday laundry day rather than Friday baking day- the banquet of the kingdom. The question is- do we want to be different- for God to change all this- to transform us, or will we remain unwilling?

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