

A Sermon by the Reverend Timothy A R Cole
The Fourth Sunday after Epiphany
Sunday, January 31st, 2021

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

Psalm 111

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Mark 1:21-28

Ps 36 v 9

*For with thee is the fountain of life:
in thy light shall we see light.*

This verse from Psalm 36 has always struck me as both beautiful and a little puzzling. How can light make us see light?

Where I grew up in Edinburgh, Scotland there used to be a hospital called the Craiglockhart War Hospital. The famous WW1 poets Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon met there when they were mentally recovering after the trauma of the trenches. My father was a parish priest in the 1960's when Craiglockhart was fully a mental hospital and he used visit an old retired army major there. He told me of how once, he, the old Major and a nurse were standing in the large garden there when the old boy suddenly said, "Padre, do you see that wall at the bottom of the garden?" My Dad said, "Yes Major." "They throw your body over it when you die here." The nurse replied, "Come now, Major that's a crazy idea!" "Well," he said, "why do you think I am in here!"

What do we do when we come across people whose grasp on reality has been lost? It's difficult isn't it? I remember my brother once had a big operation. He was under the knife for 15 hours in fact. We visited him half a day after the operation and he was very delusional. He really believed that a gang from Glasgow were coming to burn down his house. More disturbingly, I remember that he didn't believe that I was me. He thought I was someone pretending to be me and that really, I was working for this gang that was out to get him and his family. His wife and I gently tried to disabuse him of these ideas, but we didn't have much success on the first visit. In time of course, he came to himself but it was hard to know what to say at the time.

Many years later, I also remember visiting my father who had had a number of strokes. He had some great and totally unrealistic hopes about what he would do next, and I remember being torn between telling him the brutal truth that none of these things were ever going to happen, and trying to work through the possibilities with him, in the hope that he would come to see just how impossible what he was saying really was. It was heart breaking.

I expect that many of you will have been in some similar position yourselves. Trying to find the balance between telling the truth, and doing what was best for someone who has no means to see things as they really are.

In this morning's Epistle we see a similar issue being worked through. How do you deal with someone who is not mentally impaired, but just misled and wrong in such a way that they still absolutely believe what they are saying?

Paul, is talking about Christians who couldn't quite shake off the old belief in the pagan Gods and therefore felt they were breaking their allegiance to Christ by eating food that had been offered to one of the old gods. As Paul points out, this should not be a problem to a Christian who knows that these pagan Gods don't exist. If they are not real then, whether food has been offered to them or not, cannot matter to a Christian. What Paul, realizes though, is that the fact people have false or wrong belief is something that we have to deal with, even if it is false. Paul is suggesting that just telling people that something is not true does not necessarily help them if the belief is deep inside them, and something they can't change that easily. So, Paul suggests a pastoral approach. Of course, you can eat that food, but you shouldn't if, by eating it, you weaken another person's faith and cause them to doubt both you, and the faith you are teaching.

That Jesus saw this, is clear in some of the encounters he has with people. The woman taken in adultery is being led out to be stoned to death by an angry mob. Jesus is asked to give his consent to this lawful killing. Jesus does not contradict their belief that they were doing was the right thing. To do so would not have worked, and would only have made him out to be a lawbreaker himself. Instead, he simply stipulates that "Let he amongst you who is without sin be the first to cast a stone at her." They are taken aback, and leave one by one beginning, we are told, with the eldest. Nor does he condemn the actions of the woman. He just tells her to go and sin no more.

The rich young man who asks what he lacks to gain the kingdom of heaven is a similar case. Jesus doesn't try to correct his mistaken view of what constitutes real morality. Instead, he offers him a completely different way. Sell all you have and give it to the poor and come and follow me.

So, what does work? How do we deal with people who are honestly and completely wrong and unable to accept that they are?

Well, in those two examples Jesus shows us. He saves the woman's life and he offers the rich young man the chance to be his disciple. As St Paul says, "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up." Jesus doesn't argue. He acts, and seeks the persons good. Sadly, the rich young man didn't follow him, but had he, he would have come, in time, to understand where he was wrong and, so will we if we take Christ's offer to follow him.

In this morning's Gospel we see an unusual kind of Epiphany. Who Jesus is, is revealed not by himself, or by God, but by the enemy. The demon in the man recognizes what most of the people there did not; that Jesus was "The Holy One of God."

Light reveals things and makes us able to see them, but darkness also reveals the light. If you imagine a room full of bright sunlight, it would be quite possible for a candle to be burning in a corner and you not even notice it. Draw the shutters and the curtains, however, and block out all the light and suddenly, the candle becomes the most important and obvious thing in the room. The demon recognizes Jesus because darkness simply cannot ignore the light. That is why the darkest times in our lives are often when we see both the best as well as the worst in ourselves and other people. I have seen that in the military context anyway. Otherwise less than average people suddenly emerge as caring, brave and self-sacrificial. Otherwise, bright, amusing, competent people can likewise be revealed as mean, selfish and cowardly. The darkness swallows some and reveals a great light in others.

As we come here week by week. As we seek Christ's presence and open our hearts and minds and mouths to receive him in the sacrament, we recognize that there is false belief everywhere. Madness in all its forms is not uncommon, even if believing that our bodies get flung over the garden wall when we die might be a little unusual! Sadly common also, are the sometimes completely unrealistic hopes of our friends

and relatives, the views entrenched by upbringing or ignorance or by the various bubbles we inhabit, or the failure to see the value of the people who occupy the everyday spaces in our lives, all these false beliefs are sadly our daily bread. What the readings today say, is that argument and truth telling are not enough. Not for those around us, and of course, just as much, not for us. It takes the loving action of someone who cares more for the person than for their false perception. I remember my Father used to say, “Don’t pay too much attention to what people say. People do talk an awful lot of rubbish an awful lot of the time. Try to pay attention to the child of God that is hidden behind the nonsense. Behind the blizzard of over confident words, if you listen carefully, you can hear the sad frightened voice of God’s dear Child.” I can remember watching him do just that. Making someone who was embattled and almost certainly wrong about something, feel respected and cared for and lifted up. And he did it without arguing or agreeing with a word that they said.

“For with thee is the fountain of life:
in thy light shall we see light.”

I think this may be what the verse from the psalm means. If we are able to bathe in fountain of Christ’s light, only then are we able to see the light in others, and begin to see the false belief in ourselves.

“Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.” May we build and not puff!