

## The Love that Conquers All

*A sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney on Sunday 24 July 2011, by David Gill. Readings for the sixth Sunday after Pentecost were Genesis 29:15-28, Romans 8:26-39, St Matthew 13:31-33,44-52*

Some of you, I know, are fans of Rowan Atkinson – the British comedian who gave us “Mr Bean” and “Blackadder”.

Remember his skit entitled “The Devil”? The scene is hell, Atkinson is an amiable, charmingly satanic Devil, and he’s receiving a batch of new arrivals downunder. He welcomes them to their eternity of fire and brimstone. Then, with horns clearly visible and clipboard in hand, he begins to get his new residents organized.

“Looters and pillagers,” he says, “over here. Thieves, if you could join them. And lawyers, you’re in that lot too”.

“Fornicators, if you could step forward. My, there are a lot of you, aren’t there”.

“Americans, over there”

“And here, Moonies, masochists, mass-murderers – and Methodists!”

We laugh. Partly because Atkinson makes such a suave, sophisticated, so-very-English Devil. Partly because of the innuendo, as he lumps together lawyers with thieves, Methodists with mass-murderers. Partly because the literal picture of hell is patently ridiculous. Partly, perhaps, because humour is always a good way to dispose of something we’d rather not think about.

So, we laugh.

But pause a moment. I’m not sure our Christian ancestors would have laughed. You and I may shy away from issues like judgement and damnation, but generations past took such things very seriously indeed. As did those who wrote the Christian scriptures. As, it seems, did Christ himself. There’s something here we cannot just ignore.

Take what we've just heard. The 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew's gospel includes a string of parables. Jesus is using some homely images – well, they would have been homely for the people of those days – to teach about the dawning kingdom of God. God's rule, he says, is like ...

- *A mustard seed*: something very small, seemingly insignificant, that to our surprise becomes something very big, providing a home for all.
- *Yeast*: apparently unimportant in itself, yet vital in providing a staple food and hence essential for life.
- *Hidden treasure*: something of such worth that anyone in the know will sacrifice everything for it.
- *A pearl of great value*: the same point again.
- *A net that catches fish of every kind*: the inclusiveness of God's rule. So far so good, but note how this parable continues. The good fish will be kept, the bad thrown out. "So it will be at the end of the age," says Jesus. "The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth".

There we have it. As with last Sunday's parable of the weeds, the grim warning: judgement, and damnation for those who fail the test.

Well, that's one way to get your audience's attention. Sometimes it's not enough to tell people they should pay heed because what you're saying is important. Sometimes a bit of drama is needed. One of Sydney's preachers, years ago, used to terrorise his congregations into attentiveness by stopping mid-sermon and thundering "Wake up! You're dozing!" I've never had the courage to try that myself, but they say it worked for him.

Well-targeted fear can be an effective stimulant too. Whoever invented high school examinations knew that.

So – wake up! Stop drowsing your way through life. Don't be content to drift. God's rule is real. God's rule is now. The implications for you are urgent and far-reaching. This message matters -- ultimately. Your response also matters -- ultimately. That's how we should interpret Jesus' warnings about judgement and damnation, heaven and hell. Not as a Lonely Planet guide to eternity. Not as predictions of anyone's final destiny. But as a way of underlining, of putting up in neon lights, the profound significance of what is confronting each one of us, *now*.

Some Christians, sadly, miss the point. They want to use the Bible as if it were a sort of universal airport departures board, telling us who's going where. Good Christians, they insist, are destined for heaven while everyone else has a one-way ticket to hell. That I just cannot believe. For four reasons.

*First, because what we know about those who are not Christians.* In the old days we formed our attitudes towards people of other faiths without knowing them. Now, mercifully, that has changed. Australia has more Buddhists than Baptists, more Muslims than Lutherans, twice as many Hindus as members of the Salvation Army. People of other religious traditions are our friends, family members, neighbours, workmates. In so many of them, here and overseas, I have met depths of wisdom, compassion and kindness for which I can only thank God. There is now no excuse for a self-satisfied Christian judgementalism born of ignorance.

*Second, because of what we know about what makes people tick.* In the old days we thought it was all a matter of willpower. Now we know it's more complicated. People are shaped by history, culture, nature, nurture, even what happens in the womb before birth. We are who we are and we act the way we do because of so many factors over which we have no control, some of which we're not even aware of. Willpower? It matters. But we are conditioned, and so our wills are constrained, to an extent we hate to admit even to ourselves. Remember that, next time you find yourself about to rush to judgement on another human being. The French have a wonderful saying: "To understand all is to forgive all". And God does understand all.

*Third, because of what we know about the strange ways of God.* If the life of Jesus is anything to go by, God seems to have a soft spot for sinners. The people he just cannot stand are those who think they are righteous. The rule of God, it seems, turns everything upside down – including all our notions of virtue and worth, reward and punishment. Good or bad or a mixture of both, saint or sinner or someone in between, whoever you are and wherever you stand, you only stand thanks to the mystery of grace.

*Fourth, because love, ultimately, conquers all.* We heard another reading this morning. Paul was writing to Christians in Rome, speaking of how we are caught up in a divine yearning for change beyond anything mortals can achieve, or hope for, or even comprehend. There is a groaning in the heart of God, and somehow we're part of it. Then comes his wonderful assertion of the power of love over against all the lesser powers that constantly threaten to enslave or destroy us.

“Who will separate us from the love of Christ?” he asks. “Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?”

Or, Paul might have added, will blindness, or unbelief, or weakness, or folly, or sin – or anything else you and I poor, fumbling mortals might come up with?

“No,” he says. “In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us”.

“For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor *anything else in all creation*, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord”.

Judgement is trumped by love. Paul stakes everything not on fear, but on God.

You and I should, too.

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