

Trinity III, 2019

Is. 66:10-14; Gal.6:7-16; Luke 10:1-11; 16-20.

God is not mocked, and sowing to the flesh.

One of the things I keep meaning to get round to is putting bibles back in the pews. It's good to follow the readings as you go along. It's especially good when the Church is trying to pull a fast one.

You see, if you just listened to the Gospel, and weren't reading it at the same time, you won't have noticed that I skipped four verses out. Verses Twelve to Fifteen just disappeared. The people who put our readings together decided that you shouldn't hear them. They decided those verses wouldn't be good for you.

Because in Verses Twelve to Fifteen, I'm sorry to say – whisper it softly - Jesus is not nice. He's not just giving the disciples instructions about how to spread his word; he's not just rejoicing with them that Satan has fallen. That would be upbeat, shiny happy Jesus. Verses Twelve to Fifteen, however, is someone else: 'Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you Bethsaida! (these are both towns in Israel, where Jesus' message hadn't been very well received). If the deeds of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon (Gentile towns, by the way, dens of sin and iniquity) – if they'd been done in Tyre and Sidon, the people there would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes. But at the judgement, it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon than for you...' . This is harsh, judgemental, frightening Jesus – and we don't like him, so we'll just leave it out. This, my friends, is why you need bibles in the pews. Don't just trust clergy to tell you the truth. This is why we had a Reformation.

It's particularly ironic that the lectionary tries to pull this stunt today, when the second reading, from Paul's letter to the Galatians opens with those fearsome words: 'don't be deceived: God is not mocked.' Don't be deceived, God is not mocked. And the clear implication is that if you *do* mock him, well, you'll reap what you sow. You'll get your comeuppance.

But what is to mock God? I don't think Paul means that God is an insecure little ego who can't take a joke, or even that God gets particularly upset when people dispute his existence or his power or his goodness. At one level, God doesn't care what you think of Him: He doesn't need to prove Himself or defend himself in a contest of egos with you. You're really not that important. No, the kind of mockery God cares about is when we use Him to serve our own agendas – in old fashioned language, when we take his name in vain. Like say, when we claim him for our side in the wars we fight. Or when a TV preacher uses religion to steal from the sick and the poor. Or, maybe, when nice liberal modern Christians decide in advance what God *should* say and just skip over the verses where Jesus disagrees. We'd

rather have our God, our nice god, than the real one. We'll have things how we want them, thank you. God needs to get with our programme.

And that, incidentally, is a pretty good definition of what Saint Paul means, also in Galatians 6, when he goes on, repeatedly, about the flesh. If you sow to the flesh, you'll reap corruption from the flesh. His opponents want to boast about the flesh, they want to make a good showing according to the flesh. And as in Galatians 6, so in much of the New Testament: again and again the flesh is clearly *a bad thing*. And so into our liturgy: every time we baptise a child, we charge them to stand bravely against the world, the flesh, and the devil.

Now this has been pretty fundamentally misunderstood by many, many Christians. Some have thought that there's actually something wrong with *being* flesh in the first place, with having bodies. The body, they said, was just a useless, sin and sickness prone hulk from which the pure spirit had to be freed - salvation. It is hard to describe in quite how many ways this is a complete misreading of the Bible, but let's just start with the basic two: number one, Genesis tells us that the God who made us bodies looked at us and saw that we were good. Number two, Jesus not only was a body during his life, but remained so in his resurrection. Touch me, he said to Thomas. Does a ghost have flesh and bones, like you see I have? The body might be – is – staggeringly, mind-bendingly transformed in the resurrection, but it is never, ever disdained or thrown away.

But even Christians who get *that* still often don't understand the business of struggling against the flesh. They think it must mean sins that have especially to do with the body – sins of the stomach, sins of the roving eye and wandering hands and excitable organs. Now, I don't want to deny that those things can be important spiritual struggles – and for most of us, at some point, they really are. But... they aren't what the Bible means by flesh. Or, more accurately, they're only a very small part of what the Bible means by flesh.

And what the Bible *does* mean is much more adequately summed up by what I suggested lay behind how we edit the readings: We'd rather have *our* God than the real one. We'll have things how we want them. God needs to get with *our* programme. That's the flesh. Nothing especially to do with physicality. Flesh, for the Bible, means life lived turned away from God, life lived as if we were the source of all meaning and value and authority, life lived not caring what the One who made it wants for it. And we call that 'flesh' not because it is *physical*. We call it 'flesh' because whilst it can be sweet and fresh and seductive at first, sooner or later it turns out to be weak, disintegrating, collapsing in on itself. Flesh dies. And in the end, if you sow to the flesh – if you live your life turned away from God, not caring what you were made for, out of tune with your nature and your destiny – well, says Paul in Galatians, you'll reap to the flesh. You'll die, in every sense. Woe to you Chorazin, woe to you, Bethsaida.

However... there's something even more important to remember about flesh in the Bible. For every negative verse you can find about the flesh, and my goodness there are many, there is one verse which changes forever how they must all be read. The most famous, and justly so, flesh-saying of them all. John Chapter One, Verse Fourteen. Our Christmas Gospel: The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us. The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us.

Now what that means is that in Jesus, God the Son not only became physical. He not only had a body. Rather, he went right into the depths of the human turned away-ness from God, and made it his own. Everything about our gone-wrongness, every aspect of the catastrophe that happens when human beings forget who they really are, all of it Jesus makes his own. That's why he hangs on the Cross. He becomes the wreckage we've made of ourselves. Paul puts it this way, in one of the most staggering verses of the Bible: 'God made him to be sin, who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God' (2 Cor. 5:21). God made him to be sin, who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God. That's *stunning*. It means the Son of God makes all of our disaster His own, and because He does that, we get to make His right relationship with God *our* own. That's the heart of the Gospel.

And that, to return one last time to Galatians 6, is why Paul is worked up about circumcision, and the law. And he would be worked up about anything which human beings said, yes, that's it, that's what makes us worthwhile, that's what saves us, that's the answer to our catastrophe. No, says Paul. It's not circumcision. It's not the Law. It's not being good, it's not being wise, it's not even believing the right things – it's Jesus Christ, and him crucified. Only Jesus. He is the One in whom we are turned round, turned back, turned to God. He is the one in whom alone all flesh can hope. To Him be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

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