

Emergence – take up the cross

Readings Lent 2 Genesis 17:1-7; Romans 4:13-25; Mark 8:31-38

This week. I have wrestled with two questions that came out of the readings.

The first is, ‘what kind of God is this?’

And the 2nd is, ‘what does it mean to take up the cross?’

Let’s start with the big picture. That’s easy.

Much of the human struggle is not whether there is a God – but what is the nature of God. If you are a person who ponders a lot on scripture, then you would naturally wrestle with Old Testament God/New Testament God and how to interpret in real life, the promises made in either testament.

Today, I’ll simplify it. But that’s all it is – a band aid for now - because tomorrow we will all be back to trying to figure it out again.

That’s OK because all God really wants is for us to be engaged. We spend a lifetime trying to understand our siblings and children. I believe God would be best pleased if we also spent a lifetime trying to understand the Divine. Paul did. He tried to discern “the character” of God. Might I say, that’s a very Greek philosophical approach.

The first 2 readings (Genesis 17:1-7 and Romans 4:13-25) give us a few clues:

1. God keeps his promises – there was no reason for Abraham to believe him but his steadfast faith kept the possibility open.
2. God gives life to the dead and brings into existence things that did not already exist. God of creation and possibility. God of improbability. God is the door that opens into unimaginable outcomes.

We live between the incredible promise that God will redeem the world (including us) in a time when there seems little hope.¹

3. God is the author – the one acting. In Romans 4:24 – ‘for us who believed in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead.’ The passive voice clearly implies that God is the primary actor in the Christ event. So *don’t* ask me to explain the Trinity in catholic terms because I can’t except to say that God the creator and God the promise keeper find their fullest expression in God the Redeemer.

¹ Brueggemann, Cousar et al, *Tests for preaching* p.206

Simple – for today. Complicated tomorrow; especially when we try to explain it again – or we turn to the cross.

Three times in Mark's Gospel, Jesus predicts his suffering, death and resurrection and three times the disciples either won't listen or can't understand.

Surely that sounds familiar. Some of you may have read an article I wrote in the Presbytery magazine about how aging parents longed to talk to their adult children about their strategies for aging and their plans for the funeral ...and after. But the children will not have a bar of it. Talk of death is verboten!

Parents are obliged to live forever.

As a chaplain, I was the mediator in the last possible moments trying to help the children open their ears to what the parents *had* to say. It was heart breaking. I saw adults refusing to either listen or understand how important it was.

No wonder Jesus lost his temper. 'You do not have in your minds the concerns of God – but merely human concerns.'

I could not say to the adults behaving like children – you are only thinking of yourself and your own loss and not the living human who has nurtured you!

Was Jesus still angry when he called the crowds and said to them 'take up the Cross and follow me?' If anyone is ashamed of me ...in this filthy world...then I will be ashamed of them.

Shame is a big thing here. Shame is like treacle, it sticks to you and anything you touch. Shame is a serious weapon.

Shame is used to keep abused people quiet

Or to keep them from protest.

Shame is paint used to colour women fighting for equal rights;

Unionists organising for justice;

Youths protesting against corruption.

Lenny Bruce, an American comedian and social commentator died in 1966. He used satire and comedy to illustrate power imbalances and the importance of free speech. He once said, if you can't say 'fu%#!', you can't say 'fu%#! The government. He was convicted on obscenity charges two years before he died

and was pardoned posthumously. He also said, 'there are never enough I love yous in the world'. They didn't put him on trial for that.

He was a disrupter who used comedy and discomfort to discredit those who use shame and silence against the vulnerable. Typical of one of his skits, he'd come out on the stage and say an objectional word. A derogatory name used to describe a person or a group of people. Everybody would tense up. And he'd say it again. Silence – discomfort...then he'd say it again, again, again, a hundred times until it made no sense. It had no meaning – it was just syllables. And that was his point.

Now some of those groups have appropriated the words for their own use and they own them. Queer, Jew, Ethnic, Nigger – the people these were aimed at have taken control and possess these words. They are saying, 'you can't use them to hurt me anymore. I decide.'

The Romans had many ways of executing people. They reserved crucifixion for those they wanted to make an example of - it wasn't a spectator sport, like burning, hanging or feeding to the animals. It was a statement. High on a hill or on the road into town. It was a sign.

We even use the expression today in modern parlance 'nailed to the cross' – meaning making my point. My opinion is fact. In fact, the Luther wrote: *Crux sola est nostra theologia*, "The cross alone is our theology."

The point I am trying to make is that death on the cross was meant to shame. There was nothing dignified about it. It was designed to humiliate. And putting Jesus, the alleged 'King of the Jews' between the thieves was intended to be an added disgrace.

The cross as a symbol was not taken up by the church in the first few centuries. They wore their shame. And when it did, it was a crucifix. A tortured Jesus hanging helpless and bleeding reminded people of the Lamb of God, the sacrifice – made for you. It was a reminder and a design to make you humble and maybe even a little afraid.

The crucifix as a visual symbol was later rejected by the protestant churches as idolatry. For them – either no crucifixes, no symbols or just cross with no Jesus.

But what if, it was appropriated as a symbol of protest?

We always interpret Jesus words to take up the cross as in sharing the yoke...and yes, that's right but I think he was saying more than that. Jesus was big on symbols that said something. Think of the donkey instead of a white steed. He was making fun of the Romans.

Jesus says if you are ashamed of me, I will be ashamed of you. What if, we, as Christians are taking that symbol of shame and making it our banner.

A proud banner that says, 'Yes! We are the people following Jesus!' and what of it?! It was too dangerous in the day but how that would have robbed the symbol (and the event) of its sting. Imagine how the Romans would have dealt with crosses appearing on walls and hoardings, in windows and on the side of whatever would have been the equivalent of buses.

Sadly, later in history it did, on shield and saddles, helmets and armour as the crusaders used it as a symbol of occupation and oppression. The KKK would intimidate residents by burning a cross on their lawn. Symbols can be appropriated for both good and evil. Get the behind me Satan.

I don't think the disciples ever really understood the importance of the cross.

They could not get past the importance of death. A death they would not hear about. A death beyond imagination like Abraham's son that would be the birth of nations. The disciples had plans...and they had not considered a God:

Who keeps his promises;

Makes things come to life in unexpected ways;

And is in control – the author of this adventure.

Creator God – May I hold the cross as a protest against injustice and not as a weapon of shame. Amen.