

PENTECOST 2 YEAR B / 10 JUNE 2012 / EAGLEHAWK 10 AM

Rhoda was in St. Andrew's PFA Youth Group when I was a member. She had moved up from Melbourne to take up a teaching position at one of the local primary schools. Her parents were good church going-folk from a pre-union Presbyterian church in Melbourne. Under the ministry of Rev. Nevin Vawser at St. Andrews, who was always challenging the congregation about going further with God, Rhoda sensed a call to teach in an Aboriginal community in Central Australia. With a great sense of excitement she went home to share her joyful news with her parents. The reaction she got was quite the opposite from what she had expected. They said she was mad, abandoning a safe and secure career in the education department. And fancy living among those Aboriginal people who are all dirty and smelly! The terrible conflict that scene set up for Rhoda cost her dearly. But she went in obedience to the call she felt under God. I lost contact with her at that point as we went overseas for me to study. But I was so glad to learn some years later that not only had Rhoda loved her time in the Aboriginal community where she went, she had fallen in love with a bloke from one of the cattle stations, had married, and had begun her family as a woman of the outback.

We miss something very deep if we move blithely past this passage this morning and not see the pain that Jesus must have experienced in the human situation to which our passage refers. To put the passage into its context in Mark we simply note that in the preceding narrative ordinary, unprejudiced folk, recognizing the goodness and God-given character of Jesus' power; they flocked with open hearts to avail themselves of it. They are the ones who were so responsive that they crowded Jesus such that he and his disciples found it difficult to fit a meal into their schedule.
(read Mark 3:19b, 20)

I suppose you could put it this way: the unchurched, the great unwashed, the unlearned, flocked to hear him. What he said and what he offered made sense to them; it touched their spirits and healed their lives. They couldn't get enough of him. That's the setting in which Mark places this incident we read today. You see, if you were to ponder the question of which two groups in that society would be most likely to respond as the ordinary people had, who would they be? Well, first, those who knew him best: his family. And second, those who were ostensibly closest to the God who was seen lived out in Jesus' life: the religious. So you can see what Mark is saying: that the ones most likely to be uninterested in Jesus' ministry – those on the outer of the religious life, the common people – are those who flock to him. While those you would expect to respond with a generous spirit – his family and the religious – do the opposite.

Let me try a statement on you: the message of the kingdom will always be a challenge to religion and will always challenge our religiosity. By that I mean, the message of the kingdom will always challenge the human constructs we create to take the place of faith. We get it wrong if we think of the religious in this story as being wicked people: nasty, vile, people who you could pick a mile off as not being on the side of the angels. That is a caricature which I think we may construct of them sometimes. They were good living men, trying to live upright and righteous lives according to the accepted construct they had inherited. And make no mistake, they felt sure that in opposing this young rabbi from Nazareth with his outrageous ideas, that they were being faithful to God. No doubt, Rhoda's parents felt the same from their religious framework as well. They were good church people but were concerned that their daughter had come under the influence of some way-out minister up in Bendigo who was putting ideas into her head which were going to ruin her life.

This passage is a crucial passage in the flow of Mark's narrative. It is a very early indicator of the conflict that would put Jesus on the cross. It wasn't a new conflict of course. You only need to read the record of the prophets to see that. We have a record of some of the prophets who spoke the different word which challenged the powers of the time: but there were plenty others who don't get into the Hebrew scriptures. But of the ones we know, there was a universal response to their message which occasionally led to them finding the same fate as Jesus. And the same dimensions of conflict have continued on down the years since Jesus' death as well: how many beautiful people have been put to death simply for propounding something which was challenging to the accepted religious paradigm of the day. Galileo was one such, though thankfully he was not

put to death just locked up at home for the last years of his life. What I found fascinating in my reading the other day is that it was in 1992 that the Vatican actually formally admitted that Galileo was right: a mere 359 years after he had been condemned as a heretic for his radical view that the earth was not the centre of all things.

There can be little doubt that the sorts of things Jesus did demanded some interpretation and response. Not only was he teaching in a way which had an inner power and authority, but where does this power come from which enables him to perform the mighty works that he does? Some expression of something beyond what is defined as normal must be present in him, but what? How is he to be read? They are the questions demanding a response which lie behind this reading. And let us recognise that being there, on the spot, with Jesus in the flesh, does not remove the ambiguity nor lessen the risk of one's decision. Had we been there, with our religious construct around our thinking, we too would have faced the challenge of what to make of this man who was simply outside the normal.

And that challenge never goes away in the life of faith. That was the case in the story of Rhoda I shared before. It is the case whenever we hear or see anything that comes to us containing that degree of discomfort which the kingdom of God and its manifestation will always bring. When I consider my lifestyle with all its comforts and ease and then hear stories, even the stories of the young people in the Chibobo Orphanage, I am discomforted. I am not sure what to do with my discomfort, but make no mistake, that discomfort flows from the kingdom of God challenging my life and the things I live for.

As is Mark's wont, he has one scenario encapsulating another. The classic example of that is the story of Jairus' daughter. You may recall how Jairus' servants come and ask Jesus to come to Jairus' house to heal his daughter. While on the way, a completely different story occurs about the unnamed woman – it's fascinating how many of the women in the gospel story remain nameless – the unnamed woman who has a constant hemorrhage. Then the story returns to the healing of Jairus' daughter. Here, the story about scribes and their response to Jesus is encapsulated within the context of the concern of Jesus' family.

The family's action on hearing what people were saying, was to go and restrain Jesus. Though Mark phrases the rumors they had heard as saying "He has gone out of his mind", there is little question as to how that would be interpreted in that day and age. Mental impairment had only one source: evil. And when the text says they had come to restrain him, it doesn't mean by a gentle word of rebuke. You need to have the picture of the Gadarene demoniac, so-called, in your mind and associate that picture with what is meant by the word constrained. It means literally what it says which effectively meant to chain him up.

I suspect Mark is a bit too respectful of Jesus' family to say explicitly what the text implies. If they came to restrain him then they were believing nothing different in essence from that which the scribes were saying quite explicitly. He has been possessed. And out of respect for Jesus' parents and siblings Mark lays the full charge at the feet of the scribes.

(read Mark 3:21-23)

We now have a phrase in our language "to demonize". I'm not sure that it is used that much anymore, but contexts such as this are very literal expressions of what the phrase means. In modern parlance it simply means to cause somebody or something to appear evil or threatening in the eyes of others. Listen to our parliament some time if you want to hear a constant stream of demonization going on, from both sides I might add. It is especially applied from each side in relation to the leader of the other. "She is a dangerous woman and will drag our nation down." "He will say anything to get into power but will do the opposite if he does. Don't trust him." But you ask, what are these words meant to do to the person of whom they are spoken in the mind of those who hear the words. They are meant to make them at best appear frightening and at worst appear evil. And don't tell me you haven't done it sometime in speaking about someone who for one reason or another you feel threatened by.

I'm reading a book at the moment which may well be the most important book I have read in many years. When I read a text book I am constantly looking up the references used in the text to other publications. And occasionally, the publication quoted will appeal to me such that I will send away and purchase it. This book is one such: it was quoted by another book I read and sounded fascinating. It is called "Violence Unveiled" by a relatively young man named Gil Bailie. I have never come to understand what evil really is until reading this book. It does not analyse evil spiritually. In other words, it doesn't blame old Nick for it. It is far more thoughtful than that. It analyses evil anthropologically. That is to say, it understands that evil is something that emanates from the human species and is part of our evolution as a species. Now I know that some will immediately want to ring their heresy bell on hearing that. But I am with Paul on this: you simply do not find Paul using the devil as a factor in the struggle we have with evil. Just read Romans 7 sometime and ask the question "Where does Paul see the seat of evil? Somewhere outside himself, or somewhere within?" Let me read you just two verses from that classic chapter.

(read Romans 7:22, 23)

I have long given up the idea of a personal devil. Sure you find it in places in the bible but the idea actually comes from the exposure of Jewish people to Persian and other eastern thinking which saw the spiritual realm as the battle between two equal forces of good and evil. It is called dualism. For me, there is only God: the God who is still in the process of creating a creature in the likeness of God. That creature will one day have journeyed completely out of the mode of the animal kingdom from which it has come into a new mode. It will one day be all that's its creator meant it to be.

Don't you long for a different world? Here we are on this beautiful blue planet with everything humanity needs to live a rich and fulfilling life... and people are dying of starvation, wars are being waged, corruption is found at nearly every level of government and commerce; zillions are being spent on armaments and weaponry to protect ourselves from one another. Can you believe that it is not meant to be like that? Can you conceive of a world in which not one cent of the earth's resources are turned into bombs and guns and rockets; a world in which in every place on the planet every human being will have nothing to fear from any other human being?

One of the readings we could have read today is the reading from Genesis 3. It is traditionally called the record of the fall, as though it explains by means of a wily old serpent (interpreted through dualistic eyes as the devil) who tricks the man and woman into eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The key to that passage is not the snake. The key to that passage is the response of the man and the woman when they are found to be self-aware, wearing fig leaves over their nether regions. What does each of them do when they are challenged about what they have done? They find a scape goat. For the man it is the woman: "Yeah well that woman you made she gave me a piece of the fruit and I ate it." The woman: "Don't blame me, it's that serpent you made which undid me." Scape goating.. pushing any sense of responsibility away from oneself towards another; accusing another and never knowing oneself. Demonizing another to avoid responsibility.

I guess you know what the term "ho satanas" in the Greek text, translated "the satan" literally means: the accuser. And look at the accusing that is going on in this passage by both family and religious, born of a fierce desire not to change, not to let the challenge which the life of Jesus brought to the door of their lives.

I don't know where Rhoda's parents ended up in their Christian journey. One can only hope that somewhere down the track they found it in their hearts to see what had happened in a new light, and even apologise to Rhoda and even to Nevin, the minister they had made lots of accusations against. But I know what happened to Rhoda in her willingness to hear the call of God's kingdom on her life. And that is enough for me... first of all to know that I am not the judge of what God may be doing in the life of another even if that seems different and challenging to my preconceptions; and second, to know that it is and will be in gladly taking up the call of the kingdom when it comes to me that my life will be enriched and blessed way beyond any of the things that I might consider sacrifices in doing so.