

Reflection - The Fifth Sunday in Lent
17-03-2024
St Cuthbert's Anglican Church – Tweed Heads

Jeremiah 31:31-34 God will bring a new covenant

Psalms 119: 9-16 Living by God's word will keep us pure

Hebrews 5: 5-14 Jesus is the High Priest, Milk and Solid food

John 12: 20-33 Greeks want to see Jesus, Jesus explains why he must die

Introduction

Today I would like to explore verses 23 to 26 of our Gospel reading:-

²³Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. ²⁵Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

It seems to me that we have what you could call a paradox about Jesus and about ourselves. So, I would like us to explore these two paradoxes today.

Paradox

But first let us look at the definition of a paradox.

I found one which goes like this - A statement or proposition seemingly self contradictory or absurd, and yet explicable as exposing a truth.

I can recall an example of a paradox from television commercials for Home Hardware. The ad had two dogs talking about the "Dogalogue" Big One Sale. The paradox was that it was called the "Big One Sale", but the "Dogalogue" was full of small prices.

In a paradox, we have things that don't seem to make sense, and yet they point us to something important, such as the truth.

Paradox about Jesus – v24

Let us first look at how there may be a paradox in what we hear about Jesus today:-

“Very truly I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies it bears much fruit.”

For us death to achieve something doesn't make sense.
When we die things stop. We stop breathing, our heart stops beating.

But we know that in the Christian Faith, Jesus dies so that we can live.

The reality for us is, that something so good, comes from something so bad.

And that is why it is a paradox, because something so good, comes from something so bad. But this is something we see reoccurring in the Biblical narrative. God can take the bad things that happen and bring good from it.

In our Gospel reading today we hear Jesus predicting his Crucifixion and Resurrection. This is not a one off, but something Jesus continues to tell his disciples. It was a strange and unusual message. Jesus as a Messiah was to die the shameful death of a criminal. It was strange then and when we really think about it, it is strange for us today.

But of course, Jesus didn't stay dead. Yes, Jesus died on the Cross so that we could be forgiven, but he also rose from the dead so that we could be assured of this forgiveness and have hope for the future.

In the Power of the Resurrection, we know that we also can be a New Creation.

The Jewish big picture of the World begins with Creation, but the overarching Christian Message from the Bible goes from Creation to New Creation.
In our Gospel reading today Jesus talks about himself being lifted up, and drawing all people to himself.

So, the Paradox about Jesus is that in His death, our relationship with God can be restored.

Paradox about Us – v25

And now to the Paradox about ourselves.

“Those who love their life lose it and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.”

This verse again seems counter intuitive. It would seem that loving life should be a good thing.

But it says that if we love our own life, we will lose it. This is about loving our own life ahead of God. Of course, we know we should love ourselves and care for ourselves, but we shouldn't put this ahead of God. If we love our own lives ahead of all else this leads to self centredness. And self centredness is what Jesus is referring to here. We know that self centredness is an unhealthy thing, but it is part of our human nature, and so it is a challenge we have to struggle with in our lives.

The definition of sin is doing things our own way, and not God's way. So to avoid sin, we need to continually focus on doing things God's way and not our own way.

Also, it seems very unhealthy to say you are to hate your own life. We are of course not called to hate ourselves. But, what does hating our own life mean? I believe what Jesus is trying to get across here, is that we need to be so committed to Jesus, that we hate our own lives by comparison.

So, what do we do? How can we live like this? We need to flee from self centredness. We are called to be counter cultural. When asked what the Greatest commandment was, Jesus replies with these words:-

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’³⁸ This is the greatest and first commandment.³⁹ And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’⁴⁰ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

The way I see it, is that focusing on yourself will never reveal your real purpose. Only in God do we discover our origin, our identity, our meaning our purpose and our destiny.

It is only when we put God first, that we can truly know God's peace in our lives. Jeremiah prophesied what the coming of Jesus would do for us when these words were recorded:-

‘This is the covenant I will make with them,’ says the Lord God: ‘I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God and they shall be my people.’

And the great theologian St Augustine put it like this:-

“Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.”

The Paradox for humanity is that if we put ourselves first, we miss out, but if we put God first then we get to live and understand life in all its fullness.

Conclusion

So how do we react to the paradox we are presented with today.

I suppose we can leave it as something a bit not quite right, or we can grasp the truth that is exposed, and hand our lives over to God.

Jesus, in his life, in his death and in his resurrection ushered in a new covenant. One where his followers found forgiveness and hope.

As his followers now, we are called to be the bearers of his forgiveness and his hope right here in God's world today.

May we learn from these paradoxes today, that it only when we fully hand over our lives to God's control, that we can really experience true joy, and the fullness of life that God has planned for us. Amen.