

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost – 17 June 2018

The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to thank Thomas Sutcliffe, divinity graduate of New College, Edinburgh, for his thoughts on the fourth Sunday after Pentecost.

Please note that the views expressed in these materials are those of the individual writer and not necessarily the official view of the Church of Scotland, which can be laid down only by the General Assembly.

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Introduction

Today's readings show how far wide of the mark human expectations can be and that in large part this is a result of the limitations of human understanding and perception. But the readings also suggest clearly that acknowledging and being realistic about these limitations does not mean we should be entirely negative about the human condition. Rather, having acknowledged our limitations, we are enabled to use our knowledge and experience of this life and this world to move beyond our practical, worldly judgements because we recognise through faith the power and wisdom of God.

[1 Samuel 15:34-16:13](#)

The story of the anointing of David may be familiar to many of us. It highlights the notion that, to quote a well-known phrase, 'God's ways are not our ways', (see v. 7). Samuel's own instinct was to anoint Eliab who, given the Lord's words to Samuel, was presumably tall and what we would regard as classically handsome. One can imagine that the same may well have been equally true of the other six brothers. But David was the Lord's chosen one and he had to be fetched from watching the sheep. While that was not an insignificant responsibility (and the importance and significance of the role of the shepherd in the Judeo-Christian tradition should not be underplayed), the fact that Samuel wished to see the youngest son, who had been left to act as the family shepherd, no doubt attracted comment.

It is worth noting that David himself is described as 'handsome' (v.12), so having qualities which the world values does not necessarily isolate us from God. What matters is that we strive to live as God wills. This is by no means always easy, we know that David's life was far from perfect and that he did a number of things which were morally very wrong, for which there were consequences. Nonetheless, for all his failures, David tried to live well because his love for God remained.

[Psalm 20](#)

There are many words and phrases here which at first glance may suggest a great conviction that the Lord will grant whatever we wish, as long as we have enough faith. But this is, at the very least, an oversimplification. The 'May' with which several of the verses start suggests that what follows is not guaranteed to come to pass, but more than this, a more nuanced reading of the Psalm indicates the importance of the question of whether what we desire and what God wills are identical.

Given that liturgical texts often, though not always, consciously portray the relationship between God and God's people in an idealised form (sometimes the Psalms and other biblical texts portray the relationship in precisely the opposite terms), it is appropriate to remember that God knows better than us what we need and what we want. We must strive to recognise and accept this, while always remaining aware that because God is our loving father we should not be afraid to ask for things. Verses 6, 7 and 8 are perhaps a good illustration of this point: if 'the Lord will help his anointed', (v. 6) as God's children, we can be sure God will help us.

[Ezekiel 17:22-24](#)

The text seeks to highlight how God is not only capable of making, but often does make something seemingly small and insignificant the very thing through which God's great plan for humanity and the whole of creation is brought to fruition. God can 'take a sprig from the lofty top of a cedar' (v. 22) and cause it to 'become a noble cedar' (v. 23) in its own right, in the shelter of which many types of other life can flourish. This type of imagery can be read as alluding to King David, the prophets, or Christ. In today's particular context it is certainly consistent with the unexpected nature of the anointing of David, which we have just read in 1 Samuel.

If there is any doubt about the limitations of human power, endeavours and perception, verse 24 emphasises the point by showing us the opposite side of the coin. Just as God can lift up and make use of the unexpected or seemingly insignificant, God can also lower the apparently invulnerable. Once again, this should give us encouragement as it reminds us that even when problems threaten to overwhelm us, by God's grace, we are not as helpless as we may often feel. At the same time, even when things are going well we should all remember that health and easy passage are by no means guaranteed.

[Psalms 92:1-4, 12-15](#)

This text from Psalm 92 is divided into two discrete blocks of four verses each. The first block specifically makes reference to the constancy and 'love' of God (v. 2) within the context of stating clearly the joy to be had in thanking and giving praise 'to the Lord' (v. 1). Although not explicitly stated, the tone of the text as a whole suggests that the Psalmist wishes to point to the necessity of God's action in anything that is good.

The practical result of this from the human perspective is perhaps most obvious in the second block of verses. Using substantially the same language and imagery as the Ezekiel

passage we are told, for example, that 'the righteous flourish like the palm tree' (v. 12). In case we fall into the trap of thinking that people can outlive their usefulness, we specifically read of the righteous: 'In old age they still produce fruit; they are always green and full of sap' (v. 14), further evidence if it were needed, that God works differently from human beings. The final verse makes it clear that this demonstrates the goodness of God and does not result from independent human effort.

[2 Corinthians 5:6-17](#)

If the primary concern of the Old Testament readings is to emphasise the limitations of the perception of fallen humanity on the one hand and the limitless possibilities for God on the other, it seems that St. Paul wishes to address what this means in the life of Christians. Of course, Paul does so within the context of the life, death and resurrection of Christ (v. 14-15), the central truth and mystery of Christian faith. Given that we can never understand everything, to say that 'we walk by faith, not by sight' (v. 7) is hardly ground-breaking, but it is inadequate and wrong to see this statement as implying that Christian faith is blind or that it should be completely divorced from reason. After all, our ability to reason, though limited, is a gift from God and we have a responsibility to use it. Although, Paul tells us, 'From now on... regard no one from a human point of view' (v. 16); this does not mean that we have to completely subjugate our reason and judgement. Rather, recognising their limitations and shortcomings, we should be willing and able to move beyond them in faith. If this seems unlikely or difficult, in verse 16 Paul also says, 'we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way.'

Human reason alone, in its fallen state, would suggest that the central truth of the Christian faith is unreasonable. But, direct, historic, human knowledge and experience tells us something about the figure of Jesus and gives a foundation on which faith by grace can grow.

[Mark 4:26-34](#)

This passage contains many ideas and images which are present in those already discussed, but, as with the reading from 2 Corinthians, the particular emphasis and context are rather different. We are presented with Jesus describing '[t]he kingdom of God' (v. 26, 30). First, He uses language which has parallels with the ideas expressed by Paul (v. 26-29). When sowing seed, the sower knows and is confident that it will produce plants and a crop as a result of practical experience and/or scientific knowledge, but in the fullest sense does the sower really know how and why this happens? The decision to sow is an act of faith, but

nonetheless draws on the knowledge and understanding available to the sower. It also requires some action on the sower's part, both sowing and reaping.

Then, in verses 30-32 Jesus uses a very similar image (the use of the mustard seed here is very familiar) to those found in the Ezekiel passage and Psalm 92, to suggest the vastness of 'the kingdom of God' and the fact that it grows from seemingly insignificant beginnings. The final two verses refer to Jesus' method of teaching through parables and the wording challenges us again to be aware of our expectations and the limits of our perception.

Sermon ideas

St. Paul's emphasis, in the 2 Corinthians passage, on seeing things by the light of faith rather than from a human point of view, invites us to consider:

1. What does it say about humanity and the world if we doubt the reality of the life, death and resurrection of Christ?

and

2. Is the answer to the above question reasonable?

If there is nothing transcendent, nothing that humanity cannot fully comprehend here and now, and life is simply down to freak chance, then there is a strong case for saying that life is absurd. If this is so then there is no need to concern ourselves with trying to live well or to consider others and what is good for humanity in general. It may be argued that this is not so, because an individual knows that "what is good for society is good for me." But, without a concept of transcendent good, what happens when individuals' wants, needs and judgements conflict? Christianity teaches that there is an unbreakable link between humanity and the transcendent, which is given full expression in the person of Christ. By grace, though eroded or obscured by the fall and continuing sin, human beings retain a tendency towards morality.

At the end of the Gospel we are told that Jesus taught in parables as this was the only way many members of His wider audience could understand His teaching or some elements of it. It may also be implied that Jesus was to some extent deliberately obscuring His meaning (echoing St. Mark's concept of the messianic secret), as further explanation was given to the disciples. There is possibly a danger of overemphasising this, as Jesus makes it very clear that He is using simile to describe the Kingdom of God. It is often simply the case that those who have preconceived ideas about things close their ears and hearts to other possibilities.

The importance of what is in our hearts and the significance of this in our relationship with God should not be smothered by an overriding requirement to be intellectually convinced of Christian truth. There are those who, for a variety of reasons, find it difficult or impossible to understand things intellectually but nonetheless maintain a deep and thoughtful faith. David, a fallen, sinful man strove to love God. This should be instructive to us; we should each regularly ask ourselves, what is the condition of my heart?

Even among the apostles there was often a failure to grasp Jesus' meaning, as when the apostles and Peter in particular fail to understand or recognise the significance of Jesus' foretelling of His suffering and death (also Peter's reaction to the washing of his feet). The fact that the apostles struggled to understand should be an encouragement to us. We also have scripture to guide us.

Time with children

You could begin by asking the children if there has ever been an occasion when someone they know, a friend or family member, said they could do something –or that something would happen– which seemed impossible, and yet it did happen. Alternatively, ask them to think of a time when they wanted to do something but a parent or other adult suggested doing something that seemed the exact opposite. At the time, the child did not understand how one thing could lead to the other, but by doing what was suggested, achieved what they had hoped for in the first place. This is a limited demonstration of the relationship between our finite understanding of reality and God and what they are actually like, but may help to illustrate the point.

Some practical examples of this concept could be used in the form of puzzles. Here are two possible examples:

Water measurement puzzle:

<http://www.scientificpsychic.com/mind/aqua1.html> (Link correct on 12/03/2018).

Fibonacci bird puzzle:

<http://www.scientificpsychic.com/mind/fibonacci.html> (Link correct on 12/03/2018).

The puzzles could be demonstrated but be aware that for the first one things could get rather wet if lots of people/children get involved! Props could be used to demonstrate the second (e.g. toy farm animals). This puzzle may not be appropriate for all children as it involves algebra and could be difficult to explain. Although, of course, this is largely the point (large numbers of people find algebra difficult).

You may prefer to find your own puzzles/examples that would be suitable for your particular congregations.

Prayers

The following prayers are taken from two books:

A Book of Hours and Other Catholic Devotions, ed. Seán Finnegan, The Canterbury Press, Norwich: 1998 (abbreviation used: BHCD).

St. Benedict's Prayer Book, Ampleforth Abbey press, Ampleforth Abbey, York: 1993 (abbreviation used: SBPB).

[The prayers are given under a suggested context for their use, but it may be felt that there is a more appropriate context or that some prayers may fit a variety of contexts. NB. The prayers are quoted exactly as they are found in the books and six use an individual perspective, this should be altered for liturgical use.]

Approaching God

MY GOD, I firmly believe that you are here and perfectly see me, and that you observe all my actions, all my thoughts, and the most secret motions of my heart. Though I am a sinner who has often offended you, do not, I pray, turn me away, out of that very goodness and generosity which at this time has called me to you. Give me grace, then, to pray as I ought. (BHCD, p. 298.)

TEACH me, dearest Lord, to seek for you, and then show yourself when I search. For I cannot seek unless you show me how, nor find you but when you reveal yourself. Let me long for you with all my heart, and yearn for you as I seek: O fill me utterly with love when I find you! (St. Ambrose, BHCD, p. 299.)

Thanksgiving

I BELIEVE, O my Saviour, that thou knowest just what is best for me. I believe that thou lovest me better than I do myself, that thou art all-wise in thy providence, and powerful in thy protection. I am as ignorant as Peter as to what is to happen to me in time to come; but I resign myself entirely to my ignorance, and thank thee with all my heart that thou hast taken me out of my own keeping, and, instead of putting such a serious charge upon me, hast bidden me put myself into thy hands. I can ask nothing better than this, to be thy care, not my own. (J.H. Newman, BHCD, p. 317.)

Thanks be to you, my Lord Jesus Christ, for all the benefits and blessings which you have given to me, for all the pains and insults which you have borne for me. O most merciful Friend, Brother and Redeemer, may I know you more clearly, love you more dearly, and follow you more nearly. (St. Richard of Chichester, SBPB, p. 119.)

Intercessions

Give me, O Lord, a steadfast heart which no unworthy thought can drag downwards; an unconquered heart which no tribulation can wear out; an upright heart which no unworthy purpose may tempt aside. Give me also, O Lord my God, understanding to know you, diligence to seek you, wisdom to find you, and a faithfulness that may finally embrace you through Jesus Christ, our Lord. (St. Thomas Aquinas, SBPB, p. 114.)

Let us pray

O God, who first taught the faithful in their hearts by the light of the Holy Spirit, grant that by receiving the same gift of the Spirit we may be truly wise and always rejoice in his consolation. Through Christ our Lord. Amen. (SBPB, p. 120.)

God grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot change,
courage to change the things I can,
and wisdom to know the difference. (Reinhold Niebuhr, SBPB, p. 121.)

Musical suggestions

- CH4 132 – “Immortal, invisible, God only wise” – The transcendent nature of God is set against the transient nature of this life, but note the last line.
- CH4 378a/b – “Praise to the Holiest in the height” – In praise of God's wisdom and love, that the Father sent the Incarnate Son to teach and redeem us.
- CH4 192a/b – “All my hope on God is founded” – Our happiness (hope) is ultimately dependent on the goodness of God, which can be relied upon.
- CH4 476 – “Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord” – Positive assertion of God's involvement in history and ultimate victory over evil.

- CH4 553a/b – “Just as I am, without one plea” – A confession of our struggles, difficulties and doubts, but an expression of faith in the goodness and strength of God.
- CH4 644a/b – “O Jesus, I have promised” – The expression of a wish to remain close to Jesus because He stays close to us.
- CH4 63a/b – “Psalm 100 (All people that on earth do dwell)” – Encourages the praise of God and stresses that His love is all encompassing, available to everyone.