

The Nineteenth Sunday after Trinity

Amos 5.6-7, 10-15

Hebrews 4.12-16

Mark 10.17-31

Is it just me, or are the readings actually getting harder at this time of year? Not only more difficult to understand, but also more sombre? Certainly, today's reading from Hebrews has taken large quantities of caffeine, and even so I'm not sure that I've got to the bottom of it. So if anyone out there has the key, I'd love to hear it. The first half, Hebrews 4.12 and 13, is part of the argument that has been going on from the start of chapter 3. You can tell this because it is regularly punctuated by the phrase 'Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts' (cf. 3.7, 13, 15; 4.7). That is a quotation from Psalm 95, and in the Psalm it is clearly talking about the years of whining in the wilderness. It contains an underlying warning - that it is possible to see the wonderful works of God and yet not really believe in them as saving. How could the people whom God had liberated ever forget the parting of the waters, the pillar of cloud and of fire, the water and the manna? How could they ever believe that those were just passing phases in God's mercy, and convince themselves that God had lost interest and gone off and left them? But they did manage it, according to Deuteronomy and Numbers. Hebrews is arguing that if Moses was great and performed great deeds in God's name, then Jesus is even greater. We mustn't be tempted to lack of trust, like our forefathers.

So then, at the start of the passage set for today, the warning that has been fairly safely anchored in the past, in stories of our foolish ancestors, suddenly comes home. The rather rambling style of the previous chapter and a half, with its clauses, sub-clauses and quotations, suddenly flashes into life like the sword it describes.

What is this sharp, 'two-edged sword' that can pierce through things that you thought were completely welded together, and see through to a reality even you didn't know you were concealing from yourself? The verses that follow make it clear that this living, active word is primarily Jesus, our great High Priest. But I think it also requires us to hear that in this particular context of perceptive, eagle-eyed judgement, it is Jesus speaking the word 'Today'. 'Today, if you will hear his voice' has been the refrain running through the last chapter and a half. It is a word requiring immediate response. It cannot take its time and talk about yesterday, and it cannot say, 'Hang on, let's see what happens tomorrow.' 'Today' is now or never.

And then the second half of this reading from Hebrews becomes less comforting, rather than more. Usually we read it as saying that Jesus understands our weaknesses and so he'll overlook them more easily. But notice it is also saying that, yes, he does understand our weaknesses, but he didn't give into them. The Israelites in the wilderness could just about argue that God didn't know what it was like to be hungry, thirsty and frightened,

otherwise he might be a bit more understanding about their complaining. We have no such excuse.

It is interesting to see Jesus, the sharp two-edged sword, discerning exactly where the knife must go into the man who asks what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus looks at him and says 'Today' to the one thing the man cannot bear to do today. This is a man who is, by all standards, good, and he truly believed that there was no space between soul and spirit, joint and marrow where the sword of judgement could go in. But Jesus sees it, and says 'Today'. And the man goes away, shocked and grieving.

But notice that although Jesus has found the place of deceit in this man, he has done it with love (Mark 10.21). He does not let the disciples mock him, and he makes it clear that he knows how hard a thing he has asked. So much so that the disciples begin to panic about their own position. This man goes away by himself, either to accept or reject that 'Today'. But Hebrews suggests that we turn to the Word and ask for help. There is no point in trying to pretend in front of this living, active judge, but if 'Today' is the day of testing, it is also the day of mercy. There is no possibility of persuading the judge to let you in on your own merits, because for every one of us there was a 'Today' that we turned away from, and heard it as 'next week', 'next month', 'never'. So Hebrews recommends the bold approach - no concealment, relying only on the great High Priest.

*Jane Williams
from 'Lectionary Reflections'*

Prayer

O God, forasmuch as without you
we are not able to please you;
mercifully grant that your Holy Spirit
may in all things direct and rule our hearts;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.
Amen