

Pentecost 6
12/7/2020

Mark the Evangelist

Romans 8:1-11
Psalm 119:105-112
Matthew 13:1-9

A Life or Death Contest: not just COVID-19

Sermon preached by Rev. Bruce Barber

We continue to live in unprecedented times as our entire city is once again in lockdown. It is helpful, then, to recognize that the problems all human beings face are likely to be of two kinds. Some we experience only as matters of *momentary* urgency. I lost my wallet on Tuesday in a shopping centre at the exact time that the lockdown was announced. Which of the two do you think exercised me the more? Other problems endure as issues of *lasting* concern. Sometimes the two cannot easily be separated. COVID-19 has arrived as a matter of momentary urgency as politicians juggle competing social health and economic claims, but for millions upon millions worldwide life will never be the same again.

However, it is when issues of enduring significance are unrecognized that they readily make life more problematic than would otherwise be the case,

The readings offered to us Sunday by Sunday invariably reflect both sorts of problems – momentary urgency and lasting concern. Today is a case in point.

Paul draws the attention of the church in Rome to what must be the most basic issue of lasting concern. So, he writes:

“Those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on flesh is death, but to set the mind on the things of the Spirit is life and peace”.

Notice that the contrast he draws is between flesh and spirit, not body and spirit. The distinction is crucial.

In the much-vaunted secular society that we inhabit, “flesh” is likely to be understood merely as an infatuation with the sensual. And spirit? Who knows what spirit might be thought to represent? In former times, spirit might have suggested something non-material, even to be a somewhat ethereal experience eclipsing the predictabilities of the every-day. Today, spirit lacks all definition, except when increasingly rejoiced in as something superior to “religion”. It is far from clear what those have in mind who declare themselves to be “not religious but spiritual”.

This likely secular connotation of what flesh and spirit are thought to mean is not that which Paul is addressing. On the contrary, for him flesh is the *whole of life* turned away from God – turned away in “spirit”, we might say, as well as in body. Beware of those who imagine the “spiritual” to be benign. Spirit, it turns out, might well be “flesh” in disguise; as much a disorder of a hidden “inner” as that of a conspicuous “outer”.

Equally, Paul’s “life in the Spirit” is not some self-indulgent solitary religious pursuit, but is rather the whole of life *in the body* turned toward God and the neighbour.

In another of his letters, this time to the church in Galatia (Galatians 5:19ff), Paul is confronting vital ethical matters of the moment. He chooses to use this flesh/spirit framework by way of their illustration. He first lists the contours of life in the flesh. We should not be surprised to find that fornication, licentiousness and drunkenness qualify as “flesh”. Remarkably, however, there he also lists as “flesh” such susceptibilities as: “*idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy*”. Who would have thought envy, anger, and jealousy might be described as failures of the flesh rather than of the spirit?

Martin Luther, always the master of the colourful image, once described “flesh” as “a heart curved in on itself”. Or, even better, in his earthy German, he pictured “flesh” as *Nabelschau*, literally “navel gazing”, a life originating from the centre of the self. How modern is that! And *Nabelschau*, says Paul, will, later if not sooner, be experienced as a form of death.

By contrast, life in the Spirit he describes as “fruit”, an image which suggests a flowering that is harvest from a lifegiving source: so, *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, self-control*. Being fruit, it follows that these socially desirable attributes are not likely to be self-generated. As gifts, they supplant a life dedicated to the dictates of the self. Moreover, precisely as *bodily* actions orientated towards others, this fruit becomes a genuine offering back to its source in the life of God.

The parable of the Sower is not an accidental accompaniment to all this. Here enduring concern and momentary urgency coincide. Employing an agricultural metaphor, it illustrates the consequences of life lived either as flesh or - by grace - the miracle of holy Spirit. We hear that it cannot be taken for granted that sown seeds will find their proper destination. Paths, rocks, weeds – each may well be seeds’ regrettable destination, the rich variety of places where, sooner or later, no life is to be found, therefore, places of death. Only those seeds which find good soil will prove to be productive.

In other words, the only alternative to deathly life where flesh reigns is life enriched in the Spirit which is God. This is why we must allow the conclusion of the parable to leave us with its warning appropriate to every moment:

“Let anyone with ears - listen”.
