

Judge for yourself!
Psalm 8, Luke 12:54-57

18 August 2019

Have you heard of the motoring gadget called 'Alco-lock'? It is a device fitted in the car and it is used to prevent drink-driving. If someone's been in the pub too long, or enjoyed themselves too much by over drinking at a party, this lock can prevent them from being a danger to themselves and others by driving under the influence of alcohol. It consists of an instant breathalyser. You breathe into it and if you are over the limit, the gadget locks the starting system of your car and you cannot drive off.

You could say it is a tool to save people from themselves, from the dismal consequences of their thoughtless actions. It sounds as if it may be a very useful thing to reduce accidents, but what an abdication of human responsibility! People do not have to make a judgement about right or wrong; it is made for them. And it is made in such a way that, certainly at that point they have no longer a choice in the matter. They have to get out of their car and get themselves home some other way.

Let's just hold this picture in our minds as we think about our two Scripture readings for today. The Psalmist in Psalm 8 says to God: "You have made human beings a little lower than God, crowned them with glory and honour. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands". And Jesus asks the crowds around him in Luke's Gospel: "Why don't you judge for yourself what is right?"

In their different ways, in their different contexts both readings seem to point in the same direction. As we look at them in more detail we may glean some insight into the Biblical view of our place in creation and in our relationship with God. First we have the marvellous testimony of the Psalmist. Over his eventful life this ancient poet has discovered with great amazement that human beings have been given an almost unbelievable freedom and dignity. Their sphere of thought and action is so wide that it is nearly limitless. One wonders what he would have made of our digital age, or our trip to the Moon! Where, in fact his words from this very Psalm were read out by one of the astronauts, Buzz Aldrin. But even in his own time the Psalmist could see that we have the potential to effect

the whole of creation reaching right up to the skies. The only way he could do justice to his great discovery was by saying: God has made human beings barely lower than God. What an awesome truth to arrive at! But do we understand this truth properly?

In a phone-in religious programme on the Radio some people expressed deep criticism against the Church for its understanding of humanity's role on earth. They accused Christianity for being directly responsible for centuries of mistreatment of animals and the exploitation of the earth's resources. Our instinctive reaction is to deny this. But if we want to be honest we know that as Christians we have had some easily understandable notions about the human race. Psalm 8 has often been used to justify the claim that we as human beings are unique in creation because we alone are precious to God. We alone are rational, the only species with feelings, culture and language and the capacity to praise God. That animals are devoid of self-consciousness, and exist as automata, who seemingly don't even feel pain; That animals were created for our sake and we can do what we like with them. In recent decades however scientist have shown that a number of these differences are not so unique after all. Just the other day I watched a touching video about the surprising habits of elephants. How they actually show emotions towards each other, caress each other with their trunks, faithfully keeping together in extended families, bringing up their young ones together within those family units, And the most surprising of all: how they mourn together, when any of the family dies. In the light of these and other similar stories, we have to find our uniqueness somewhere else, in something that does not bolster up our self-estimation at the expense of exploiting animals with a clear conscience.

And for this we have to turn to Jesus. In him we see what *human uniqueness* is really about. It is *the capacity for service and self-sacrifice*. Rather than affirming the traditional view that the world was made simply for human use and pleasure and that its purpose is to serve humanity, Jesus' perspective was different. He understood his vocation to be a servant of all, a self-sacrificial priest not just for members of the human community but for all creation. As we read about him, when he is lifted up he will draw all things to himself. And then God will be all in all.

But, in case we think that, this is all merely Jesus' prerogative, we have to hear him saying: "Why don't you judge for

yourselves what is right?" His question was challenging the religious assumptions of his time and it flies in the face of all our religiosity as well. We have been taught, just as Jesus' contemporaries were, that we as human beings are not capable of judging for ourselves. This is why they needed the Law of Moses and this is why we need Jesus – to tell us 'in black and white' what is right and what is wrong, how we can please God.

And yet, as we listen to Jesus himself, it turns out that he is not about this at all. It is not just that he *cannot* make all the judgements for us in our lives. We have to acknowledge that for some of today's situations there is simply no clear guidance in Jesus' teachings. He did not know about genetic modifications, or the Internet. He did not have to weigh up the pros and cons of renewable energy vs fossil fuels, or things like global warming. He didn't have a smart phone so that he could guide us just how much time spent on it is too much.

But even more significantly, Jesus does not seem *to want to* make all the decisions for his followers. Earlier in the same chapter of Luke's Gospel he had firmly refused to be the judge in a family quarrel about two brothers' inheritance. In today's passage he continues in the same vein and in the true spirit of Psalm 8 he throws the ball back in the court of the people. 'Don't ask me! – he seems to be saying. - You can do it yourselves. If you search carefully, you too will find the capacity within yourself to make the right decision, since you too were made barely lower than God. Why do you think that judging right from wrong is different from making judgements about the material necessities of life? You can tell what kind of weather is good for your harvest. Why don't you believe that you are also able to tell what kind of action is good for your soul?'

Jesus encourages his disciples to find the same hidden powers, the same, as yet undeveloped possibilities within themselves that he possesses. He teaches them not to depend blindly on other people's opinions, not even on the most sacred Law or on his teachings. He follows the advice normally given to budding writers: *don't tell them, show them*. He is there with all his powers to hold himself before them like a mirror that reveals to them their own powers. In his way of life, in his actions they can discover that they could perform similar acts of power and even greater ones than him. And in the lasting influence of the Gospel stories he does the same to us. In his life we see God visibly shown forth and it touches our

own imagination and our longings to be bearers of the divine in our lives.

Both of today's readings then deal with human responsibility and raise questions like, What is the true place of human beings in the created order? Are we the highest of the high with everything at our feet? Or are we the lowest of the low, who are fatally flawed, and can not be trusted to know right from wrong? As we contemplate the Scriptures we find that we are both lower and higher than we thought. On the one hand we tended to over-estimate our significance in the physical universe. Part of today's message is that in certain respects we are not as unique as we believed, and we certainly don't have the right to exploit the rest of creation. On the other hand, we are also liable to under-estimate our potential in the spiritual matters of life and like the drink-drivers in our opening story, we often abdicate our responsibility to discern what is right and what is wrong.

So, today's message, the good news of The Gospel is that *we all have the capacity for love and forgiveness, for service and self-sacrifice*. We are all called in our unique and individual way to incarnate God in our homes, at the work place, through our leisure activities, and in our hopeful service to the community around us. And the God who does the calling, will also do the enabling.

Thanks be to God. **Amen**

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