

It is a matter of Tack

Hosea 11:1-6; Colossians 3:1-11; Luke 12:13-21

Those who are tempted to believe that the Old Testament is basically all about judgement and the New Testament is all about grace – well, the psalm today and the Hosea reading are *all* about love and forgiveness...and then the letter to the Colossians threatens the wrath of God. Surprise!

We didn't use the whole Hosea reading but it is obvious that it speaks of a God whose wayward children are still loved. They have done just about everything possible to cheese off their divine parent and still – the love flows from every sentence. There is a line that says, "my people are determined to turn from me" but the end of the reading is full of hope. God declares that the people safe *from* the divine (retribution) and ultimately, when God calls, they will come and be settled.

God loves us not because we are consistently lovable but despite the fact that we are not.¹

This passage reminds me of what it is like to raise teenagers. You love them but sometimes, you really want to kill them...and then, hopefully, thankfully, they grow up and are settled with their families learning what we had to learn.

By the time of this reading, Israel is a teenager: cocky; sassy; independent and over-confident. They don't think they need *this* God anymore.

The letter to the Colossians was probably written by a pupil of Paul. It takes a different tack. You know, and I know, that people learn in different ways and think differently. This letter speaks to people who are used to being told what *not* to do. The law is very specific – read Leviticus. But the message in the New Testament is about a different kind of spiritual freedom that is not rules-based but rather behaviours set for, and by, a higher reason. Jesus spends a lot of time trying to explain what is earthly and what is heavenly ...but this is a pretty hard concept.

Think about it. The most successful advertising crusade in Australia's history was the "*Do the right thing*" campaign². It instilled in a large part of a generation what 'the right thing' was and that was, simply, pick up your own

¹ John Squires *with Love to the world*

² Launched 43 years ago in 1979. – I would be curious to see whether the behavioural change bled into other social conscious behaviours...there's a PhD somewhere, I'm sure.

rubbish. To a large part, it worked. But we still needed fines for those who didn't. Why? It wasn't to raise revenue. It is because there is a portion of our population who cannot comprehend what the right thing is without the fear of penalty: The wrath of God. This attitude changes from culture to culture. The author of this letter knew that.

Every year, when my Chinese post-grad students arrived for their program, they would comment how Australia was so beautiful and clean. In their orientation, where we list the do-s, don't-s and dangers to help them settle well for their course. We would tell them that Australians do not leave rubbish around. Their incredulous response was why not? Are their big fines and penalties?

Geoff tells the story of how some Scandinavian public transport operates on an honour system. The American back-packer was astounded and asked who would bother paying if no one was checking tickets and the tram passengers tried to explain to him that the tram belonged to them, as citizens, so of course they would pay. This was a completely alien concept to the backpacker.

The letter to the Colossians tries to be as specific as possible to respond to rules-based people but it also tries to demonstrate the liberty and freedom of a baptised life. The letter warns of regulations that appear to promote wisdom but whose piety and self-abasement is actually the opposite of what the gospel calls us to practice. On one hand, he is speaking to a group of rules-based people and on the other hand trying to explain that following rules does not make you good. Doing the right thing because it is the right thing to do is a very different motivator than ticking the holy boxes and waiting for the glory to rain down on you. My textbook called this, "self-promoting piety masquerading as faithfulness that actually conforms to a worldly standard"³

In our first reading, love is the answer. Just keep loving and people will come around. In our 2nd reading, here are some rules but do them for a different reason than punishment...and there will be punishment...So the question is, are we being realistic? We are asking for a higher motivation, a different attitude that is not controlled by perverted earthly, human values.

On top of this big ask. the letter tells the Colossians to step outside prejudices against others – i.e. people not like us. And it too, is very specific saying these are the prejudices you must set aside: Greek or Jew (racism); circumcised or

³ *Texts for Preaching*, Cousar, Gavinta et al. P 454

unsurmised (religious intolerance); Barbarian or Scythian (xenophobia); slave or free (economic divisions) – because all were made in God’s image. Christ is in all!

Luke is the final reading and it brings it home. Ok, if you put all your faith in earthly treasures – you won’t live to enjoy them. Simple.

If we take a helicopter view and ask, why these three readings? – you can see a pattern. There is no black and white between the Old Testament and the New. The Old Testament is referred to, it bleeds and breathes through everything in the New Testament just as there are spaces and graces in the Old Testament that speak to what is coming in the New. But that is not the point.

The point is today as it was 1000s of years ago, the world is made of diverse people. Not only are we culturally diverse⁴ we are individually diverse. We learn in different ways (visual, auditory and psycho-kinetic) we are motivated in different ways. We do things for different reasons and our values are based on different priorities.

So like a sailing ship, Jesus and the disciples use different tacks – strategic moves to capitalise on the wind and avoid rocks and shores. They speak different ‘codes’ to different groups. Jesus mastered the art of story-telling using rural references that average people could understand. Paul mastered the art of Greek elocution. All the Disciples changed tack to speak to specific groups: Greeks, Jews, gentiles, foreigners, men and women.

The challenge for the church today is to regain that agility. We’ve become somewhat tack-less as well as tactless. Learning to speak to people using images, stories and styles that tap into *their* experiences and their understandings is a whole new skill outside of ‘church-speak’. And we need to be able to address diversity as a gift not a burden. Ho’oponopono⁵ is just one way to trim our sails.

God of all languages and creator of diversity, we pray that we can find new ways to speak to people in our times. New ways to tell your love story; to promote forgiveness and nurture reconciliation of your whole world. Amen

⁴ A few weeks ago, during NAIDOC week, we spoke about how our ancestry flavours the way we see the world, our values and how we make decisions...

⁵ Hawaiian - roughly translates into ‘cause things to move back into balance’ or make things right⁵. Used as a chanting prayer when there has been a breakdown in relations. Can be used as a goodnight prayer practice to cleanse you mind ready for sleep. It goes like this: “I’m sorry, Please forgive me, Thank you, I love you.”