

Meditation on The Impossible People

Scripture: Jonah 3.10-end, Philippians 1.21-end, Matthew 20.1-16

Rembrandt : The Woman Taken in Adultery

In the name of the Creator, Redeemer and Companion

This morning I want to start by looking at the small copy of Rembrandt's painting of The Woman taken in Adultery that was given to you on the way into the Church.

On Monday I had the good fortune to attend a devotional exploration of the religious art of the National Galleries Sainsbury wing, and in particular, this painting made lots of connections for me with today's lectionary readings.



Copyright © 2000 National Gallery, London. All rights reserved.

This painting depicts the woman taken in adultery in front of a condemning group of men who are seeking to have her stoned to death. In this scene, Jesus gives the incredible words, that the person who is without sin can throw the first stone. A word of wisdom to show that we

are all broken and incomplete and that we must be careful when we seek to blame. For dramatic effect, we see the scene being outplayed in front of all the grand architecture and power of the Jewish Law establishment. The artist is making a point about the difference between God's sense of justice and the views of the religious establishment. You cannot see it, but the face of Jesus is full of love and generosity whilst the condemning crowd is all about anger, judgement and retribution. The crowd are out of kilter with God's nature. Jesus is pictured as amongst the ordinary people and humble, whilst the religious authorities are pictured as removed. powerful and distant.

In today's old testament scripture we heard from the book of Jonah – we see Jonah becoming extremely angry with God for acting in ways he did not agree with, where God chose to act lovingly towards the inhabitants of Nineveh rather than in judgement. Jonah then went and sulked about God acting how God should not.

In the Gospel reading parable of Jesus, we see the Landowner being very generous to the workers who came in late, receiving the same pay as those who had worked all day. Those who worked all day grumbled with the landowner who retorts that he will be generous to those who he decides to be generous with, and that he is not answerable to the workers for his actions.

In all these texts and the painting we have looked at, we encounter the same themes. A God who chooses to be generous and loving, whilst there is a judgementalism from religious people who seem to lose this God given sensibility to love and be generous. Why is this so?

Religious people have been called the 'impossible people'. Impossible, because they are passionately in love with God, believing that the impossible can happen and transform society in faith of God's goodness. It is these impossible people that work every day in some of the most

dark and broken places in our society, seeking to love the unloved and needy with the zest of following the God of the impossible. Impossible people have a hope of God transforming all of culture facing impossible odds. But at the same time, these religious impossible people, so sure of what they believe in 'knowing God' as a form of certainty, can impinge on other people an expectation that all will conform to their expected code of morality and behaviour. In this way, these people in love with the God 'they know' have a habit of restricting other people's human rights, and if we look at the more fundamentalist forms of the Christian Church, can start to hold dehumanising and at times verge on the verbally and physically violent. In so doing they become the oppressively impossible people to the rest of society.

Some of the impossible people mistake the passion of faith, of loving God, with acting and thinking on behalf of 'God'. Often, they have no idea that they are even doing this. This is why Jesus gets angry with the Pharisees and Sadducees, as they arrogantly believe that they know God better than Jesus knows God.

In the garden, the labourers moan because they think they know the right form of action that God should do. Jonah was angry with God for being loving and generous when he should have been judgemental and revengeful, and in the picture you have in front of you, the men with stones in their hands were angry with Jesus for being fair. In each case, the impossible people have a fixed idea about what God should do and would do, which in the picture you hold is about violence.

Well this is the ultimate form of idolatry. That people stop attending to the real God in submission to who God is – because they think they know God and what God would do as 'their God'. It is a form of inflated ego – where one's self-importance gets mixed up with 'being God'. Not only is this dangerous, and extreme – but it accounts for most of the atrocities committed in the name of the church and the Christian God.

which had nothing to do with the real God. There is a difference between the 'read God' and the God 'we hold in our mind'. I wonder if this is why God calls Godself – "Yahweh" 'I am what I am', a God who chooses who God is with no fixed points dependent on people, other than that revealed in the Holy Trinity of the Creator, Redeemer and Spirit. The God of inconceivable and uncontrollable love.

Well God does not need to be told how to act, and cannot be boxed by people, you can never know how God is going to react. God will be God despite what we think and do, and God's nature is always to love, inclusively and with generosity.

This is why Jesus constantly shocked people when he told parables, that God always acts in ways you cannot predict.

In the painting, the impossible religious people are corrected through Jesus' wisdom, who in so doing brought on the wrath of the religious law establishment that stand above him, who sought his death to maintain their own views of who God should be. This painting reminds me of the famous saying by Meister Eckhart 'God rid me of God' or in other words "Real God rid me of the steriotype of God that I hold to in my mind that distorts me". Help me to see and attend to the real God.

Do we kill God or restrict God by the strong views we hold? Do we hold so tightly to our religious opinions that we frustrate the intentions of God? Do we contribute to being impossible people to the world and to the wider church? Do we seek to control or hold back because we think we are right? 'God rid me of God'.

One of the reasons I think many of us ended up in this church, is that there is an inclusively and generosity at the core of this community. A mutuality and diversity of opinion and values. For me, St Matthews lives out a glimmer of the potential of the impossible people holding to a

powerless and loving approach to life, which allows us to be used by God to transform. That we obediently join in with what God is already doing despite us.

Well the corrective to this form of knowing God is well put in Philippians chapter 1.

For Christ has graciously granted us the privilege not only in believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well. Only by getting beyond our own ego, our own need for power, our own self-importance, can we attend to the real God. Who in this picture, seeks to offer us unlimited grace, of love, and generosity. It is something that we constantly need to revisit when we get angry or impatient with people and God.

Can I invite you to take this picture away and use it within your devotions this week. God rid me of God.

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit

Amen.