

Proper 18 Year B

Deuteronomy 4:1-2,6-9
James 1:17-27
Mark 7:1-8,14-15,21-23

Picture this.

The world is created from God and by God. Proverbs 8: The Lord created me (sophia), the first of his acts ... before the beginning of the earth. John 1: In the beginning was the word (logos) and the word was God – everything was made by logos and of logos. Two words for the material out of which the cosmos is made: sofia and logos. Are they the same? I say they are: sofia for Hebrew readership and logos for Greek.

The created world comes into being.

The entrance into this world of personified sofia, personified logos, personified God as Jesus Christ, and the Christ-events from incarnation to ascension and Pentecost, changes the monochrome old ways into the Technicolor new. Like Mary Poppins. It transforms old ways into new. It transforms us, if we agree to being transformed.

The readings for today look at some aspects of transformation.

The message from Deuteronomy this morning seems to be that diligent observance of God's law as revealed to Moses – the ten commandments I suppose – is the basis for living life.

But the message of Jesus the Christ is that blind obedience to rules is not enough. Our thoughts and intentions just as, or more, important than our actions. If our thoughts and intentions are right, then our actions will be judged right, almost whatever the consequences.

In this text, Jesus is doing two things.

- He's *changing* Moses' teaching – a sign to his listeners that if he has the authority to do this, He must be divine.
- He's deliberately and provocatively upsetting prevailing opinion and practice.

Interestingly, Jesus demonstrates a sound knowledge of anatomy when he says that whatever we take in will come out of the sewer – cloaca – that part of the body that develops into the rectum, anus, bladder and female genital tract. What goes in must come out, albeit modified.

The digestive tract, in and out, doesn't matter. It is my heart, the seat of my intellect and emotion as they thought then, that exposes me for what we are. What I think and intend says more about me than obeying rules for the sake of it.

To give churchy examples:

- sitting or kneeling or standing for prayers matters not at all.
- Receiving communion standing or kneeling matters not at all.

This seems to be commendation of what has been Anglican practice for 500 years – use God-given intellect as well as rules. Rowan Williams story – harder to be an Anglican than RC.

This is not to say ...

So I do justice to myself by guarding what comes out of my heart. I'm not very good at this: I feel very ashamed of the countless times as a father when I did things out of a sense of duty – doing things to be seen to have done them – rather than for love. Perhaps I am being hard on myself, people tell me I am good at that, but nevertheless that is what comes to mind today.

If these evil intentions come from within, this raises questions about the nature of evil.

If God created everything, does that mean that God created evil? This is one of the most fundamentally difficult questions of theology, and there is no entirely satisfactory answer. A commonly held view is that God created humans in God's image certainly, and with free will, and it is that free will that seems to lead us off course. Like pushing a supermarket trolley that refuses to go straight. Some people call this original sin, but some day I'll tell you why I don't hold with that notion – along with Eastern Christianity.

The psalm says keep thy tongue from evil and thy lips that they speak no guile. The question is how? James, Jesus' brother perhaps, offers some thoughts.

First, listen much and speak little.

Act certainly – out of charity and love rather than duty.

Second, self examination.

To 'rid myself of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness' requires self examination. James tells us that God is unchanging, and the unchanging nature of God is worth exploring, but in this context I take it to mean that since God knows Godself, God has no need of this kind of behaviour improvement because God is perfect. I am not, and I have need of thought-improvement. The human psyche is so complex, and so much of it is hidden, that I can never be sure of what is really going on. As the introduction to MP and EP says, is we think that we have no evil, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.

It is good, and confronting to remember that Holy Scripture tells us that we are created in God's image. We contain a divine core. But the trouble is that life's many vicissitudes lead us to develop thick skins that hide this divine core, like Russian dolls. James uses the phrase 'implanted word' – word in Greek being logos, In the beginning ..., and I suggest that this divine core is the implanted word – God within.

It is this that we need to make contact with and listen to when we are trying to judge how to act or decide. One way to do this is prayer.

So third, my final thoughts concern prayer.

It is not just sitting with your hands together in church.
Different ways of doing it (EMMTC SHEET)
Don't let anyone tell you that your way of doing it is wrong.

Prayer can be almost anything.

Working

Doing your job well

Tending creation

Creating

God-directed thoughts

Working things out using your God-given intellect – ratiocination – discernment

Then there's repetitive prayer, words and actions. Actions imprint things into our brains.

Ranting at God is prayer.

Job. Psalms. By ranting, the way often becomes clear because a rant can help to clear out rubbish that was blocking the view.

But the one I want to recommend to you tonight is one that I suspect is under-used.

Just **listen** to God, and for most of us, since we aren't aware that God speaks directly to us, that means listening to our innermost thoughts. Take time to sit in silence, or lie, or whatever, to listen to what your 'conscience' or whatever is telling you. That is a form of prayer.

Listen don't babble on. Be silent.

Silence

Listen to the still small voice. This kind of prayer helps us to get to our inner selves, our divine cores.

When you reach that, it will release God-ness into your being and flush out unworthy thoughts. Then we will be reborn into the Gospel – thy kingdom will have come for you on earth as it is in heaven.