

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost - 19.07.20

Sermon by Rev'd Steve McMahon

To be brutally honest, I'm not overly fond of Simon Cowell. I'm not really attracted to those shows where people appear, performing their part piece in front of a screaming audience to allow Simon, or another judge to pour scorn on them. Yes, every so often there is a Susan Boyle in the mix but all too often the attraction is to see how bad some of the acts are and how much ridicule the judges can pour on them. Whether it's "Australia's got talent", the X Factor, Dancing with the Stars or even Masterchef, I don't find it attractive to watch people being judged.

However, it seems that the idea of being judged may actually be beneficial to us from the point of view of evolution. By and large, cultures that believe in God outlive those that don't. No-one knows why. It's speculated that it's because if you have no moral guidance other than yourself and your own conscience, then you can effectively do whatever you like, whereas those who have a belief system are more aware of society's rules and ways of working in harmony. And a member of a harmonious, supporting society outlives a person living on their own. Belief in God is a way of survival in a dog-eat-dog world as it places emphasis on working together. It's better to believe in an all-powerful God than to expend all of that energy in thinking up ways to make the life of someone whom you don't like awful.

So it seems we need a judge – something or someone independent who can tell us what to do and who can punish us when we don't. Such a common standard helps us to work together as a team. If you have God as your judge, then you can choose to any laws passed down but you make such a choice at your own peril.

And yet, the idea of God as a judge sits uncomfortably for many of us – indeed, many are put off religion altogether by the notion. The parable of the weeds that we have just heard, is one which many find unpleasant with its talk about angels casting people into a blazing furnace where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. When you look at some judges around the world; at the power and corruption that seems to be linked to the role, it's difficult to think of God in anything like the same way. Who would choose to believe in a God who is a terrifying judge?

In this country, most judges thankfully are idealists who apply the laws that the government passes. In doing so they often create that elusive thing, justice. In the context of God, it is the justice that lets the oppressed go free.

God started this justice with the Jews, freeing them from the yoke of the Egyptians and giving them the ten commandments to direct them to behave compassionately towards others and warning them what would happen if they disobeyed. The intention was that these laws would be passed on to the rest of the world but instead they became a barrier to those who were not

born Jews as they were augmented by many harsh local traditions that sought to exclude rather than include. We heard St Paul's words this morning in the letter he wrote to the church in Rome to seek to address this very problem.

The Christian Church had, by AD 48, already decided that the only Old Testament laws which could apply to non-Jews are those against idols, murder, cruelty and sexual immorality. Paul himself had found, whilst still a Pharisee, that he couldn't keep all the Jewish laws; no-one could! But how would this square with a God who is judge? God would have to punish selfish behaviour of which we are all guilty.

It is only by faith in God's forgiveness and mercy, argues Paul, and through the grace of the Holy Spirit that we have power to change and be justified.

The eighth chapter of Romans (called the Gospel according to St. Paul by many) is the climax of this teaching. It's not an easy read as it uses legal language a lot: for example, we need to remember that "righteous" means "not guilty", and "justification" means God treating the guilty as though they were not. Then it's true, Paul claims, that what the Law couldn't do because human nature is weak, God did. God condemned the sin in human nature by sending the Son who came with a nature like man's sinful nature to do away with sin.

Let's unpack that a bit. When you commit a crime or offend someone, then the only way that you can get back in a good relationship with them is by making amends for what you've done. But the cost of all of our combined sins is far too high for any one of us, or even for all of us to make amends. The problem is, we can't ask any other creature to do it for us - it's our responsibility. That's why God became man - Jesus had to become fully human in order to make amends, but also had to retain his divinity in order to be capable of doing so.

And by this action, we are all of us capable of claiming that the amends have been made for our offences because we believe in Jesus - we are part of the people that Jesus has redeemed. God sent the Son so that the demands of the law might be fully satisfied by us who live according to the Spirit and not according to human nature. God, in the form of Jesus Christ, was the only human being capable of taking human nature and making it perfect. And in doing so, broke the hold sin has on us. He justified humanity as a species, and paved the way for all of us to enter God's kingdom.

Believing in God then, isn't simply something we do in order to have a moral code to live by. Nor is it a means to becoming a part of a society that thrives. Most importantly, it is the means by which we are guaranteed eternity in God's kingdom.

And that, is something that is worth believing in.