



Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon by Revd Margaret Place



Sunday 30 August 2020

READINGS

Exodus 3: 1-15; Psalm 105: 1-6, 23-26, 45; Romans 12: 9-21; Matthew 16: 21-28.

God's design of man & woman

We have reached the end of August— but I think the ups and downs of this Corona Virus year needs a **year** of compassion. We need to see compassion for the sick, for medical personnel, for those separated from friends and family through long term isolation, for those whose livelihoods are under threat, if not completely destroyed, the poor who have become the starving, and in our country, those who have suffered as a result of corruption in the handling of Covid 19 relief funds. The prevalence of gender-based violence which in our country is the worst in the world, has grown exponentially too.

It is this last which is most worrying, not only because the pressures of Covid 19 have made it worse, but because it is a virus eating away at the heart of that daily living which destroys a society from the inside. It was there before the virus, and it can't seem to be remedied. As a Christian community we cannot afford to ignore this, or to brush it off by a line in the prayer section of our pew leaflet if we hope to create a civilized, Christian society. To look at why we have become such a toxic society in this area, I thought it might be a good idea to look at something of what science says about the characteristics of men and women, characteristics which God created and perhaps what God meant when he designed the world this way. There is much recent research in the biological sciences into this, and while no one fits totally into any category, there are tendencies which help understanding.

Firstly, men and women are more similar than different. The average intelligence is the same in both sexes, and while women are better in verbal skills and men in mathematical reasoning, it has been proved that each gender can be educated to function well in the other area. Both sexes need good nutrition, nurturing and love, and fulfilment in life. While it has been proved that intelligence is inherited almost exclusively from the mother, it is also true that upbringing is equally important. Mothers play an important role in creating security and self-esteem, but fathers are vital in encouraging children to take on the challenges, growth opportunities and adventures of a world beyond the safe confines of the home. But there are differences. Not only are men bigger and physically stronger than women, there are differences in the structure of the brain too. Out of a lot of interesting things, I'll concentrate on just two.

Firstly, the link between the left and right hemispheres of a woman's brain are thicker and more closely linked than a man's, and the neural pathways work laterally as well, while a man's brain is wired from front to back. This means that women will solve problems by drawing inspiration from everywhere and

pulling ideas from all sorts of unrelated memories which add to the mix. Somehow it ends in a creative if unorthodox solution. A man will focus on the solution to the problem; he will go after it and will not be distracted by minutiae. A logical solution will be, if not the only solution, certainly the best one. He also wants to know where he stands, and what “brand” he represents. High School old boys clubs have a different significance for men than old girls do for women.

Secondly, while men and women both have the female and male hormones, each sex, is dominated by the one. Testosterone makes a man go after what he wants and he can become at least assertive if not aggressive if he is thwarted, and is less likely to be concerned by those who fall by the wayside. A woman will be just as determined, but oestrogen makes her more likely to get others involved so that the end result will include as many as possible and make everyone happy.

If we look from this perspective at the two readings read this morning, we can see something of at least the male characteristics. Last week, Peter was the one who recognized the messiah in Jesus, and was called the rock upon which the church would be built. This week, he responds predictably to Jesus’ news that he was going to Jerusalem where he would be crucified. Peter, in his own opinion, is now “second in command” and his immediate reaction is to “rebuke” Jesus. This is not the way things are supposed to happen! Yesterday Galilee, today Jerusalem, tomorrow the world! That’s the way things work with a messiah! Jesus’ way **will** do exactly that, but along a totally different path, and Peter’s way is such a distraction from what Jesus needs to do, Jesus actually calls him “Satan.” The hard destination of death and sacrifice and facing up to evil in order to defeat it through death and Resurrection is not the one-upmanship of conquest that Peter, has in mind.

Moses at the burning bush is sent to lead his people out of Egypt, but he asks God to identify himself. Even a slave people need their assurances. And God answers giving a name that has a brand – God is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. An old boys’ club of ancestry and with a history of being led by the God who led Abraham to their land, who led them to food in Egypt, and who has compassion on them and will now lead them back home. God understands the people God created, and reaches them accordingly.

Even so, there is a strong female influence which is not overtly recognized, but is there nevertheless. During a time of anti-Hebrew persecution in Egypt, Pharaoh’s daughter finds and adopts a Hebrew baby Moses, and his wide awake sister, Miriam gets the Princess, to accept the baby’s mother to breast feed him until he was weaned. That would be for two+ years. No doubt the differences between the Egyptian and the Hebrew women were never ignored, but somehow they did not stop Moses keeping his Hebrew identity, while being brought up in the Egyptian environment where government happened. This no doubt was God’s way of preparing him for the leadership role he later took on.

Jesus too came into the world through the normal pregnancy and birth of a woman God chose - Mary, the mother of God. She appears throughout Jesus’ ministry, and was at the crucifixion and also amongst the disciples in the days after the Ascension. Other women followed Jesus (Luke 8) among whom was a Joanna whose husband worked for King Herod, Mary Magdalene, and Susanna. They supported Jesus where there was a need, in gratitude for what he had done for them. Jesus, a man was supported by women, which was not usual for that time. The Samaritan woman at the well (John 4) was sent to call others from her village to hear the good news, Mary of Bethany could be said to have been a disciple of Jesus in that she was taught by him instead of helping Martha in the kitchen. Most importantly, Mary

Magdalene, the first witness to the Resurrection, was sent to tell the apostles. Women were important in Jesus' ministry. We see similar involvement of women even in leadership roles in the stories of the early church.

So to get back to our current situation of gender based violence, what is God saying to us? I think that we need to respect that God created the sexes in a specific way, even though Jesus showed that that did not mean fixed, immovable roles. Our sin has spoilt much of what God created. It is true that one of the worst evils of Apartheid was removing men from their families to go and work far from home. Boys growing up had no role models and in turn were unable to model good behaviour and manliness to their sons. It's an enormous debt we are paying as a society. Circumstances since 1994 then have not made it any easier to try and redress that huge harm. Women do their best, but a child needs the examples of both parents.

If God created men as focused individuals for whom achievement is important, then in this country with a very high unemployment rate, and with few prospects for any men (and this applies particularly to our **young** men)- it is almost impossible for them to focus and to find goals to work towards. They are open to anything that will give them belonging and purpose. When the most exciting thing available to a poor boy is a gang leader who challenges him with killing someone and raping someone else as initiation into the gang, that has some appeal to the male psyche, and beaten overworked mothers and a weakened and hence toothless education system has nothing to counter that bad influence, never mind the police and social services, are sometimes inept, and always grossly overworked. The fathers who should be there are often either modelling alcoholism or are absent. This system spirals out of control, and add poverty, addiction, lack of any ethics and frustration to the mix, and anger against someone physically weaker than yourself, namely the woman nearest you, becomes a certainty.

Women do need to learn that their intelligence and education need to be given expression, and the lack of assertiveness amongst many makes them an easy target for bullying men. That being said, protection for and rebuilding of them is still not enough for the huge scale of this violence, and unless we can remove this scourge and rehabilitate our men, it won't end. We need to put aside ideologies which don't work, we need to be reactive to the corrupt and inactive parts of our government, we need to galvanise the selfish aspects of business to being more proactive in community work. As God heard the cries of the enslaved Hebrews, we need to hear the cries of the women enslaved by the cruelty of the men who are supposed to be their lovers and protectors, and the angry cries of men who are enslaved by a society that doesn't care.

When Moses asked God for his name, God answered two things. He is God of their fathers, but he is also, "I am who I am", or the literal Jewish translation "I will be who I will be". God will not be tied down to any defining name. God breathed into Adam to give him life. Jesus spoke of the spirit as a wind that goes where it wills. At Pentecost, the spirit came as a mighty rushing wind. The wind of God is blowing throughout this land in answer to the prayers of the many. God has heard our prayers as he heard the prayers of the enslaved Hebrews. But we need to follow our Saviour to another Jerusalem to have our ideas about ourselves and our country crucified, and it will be a big crucifixion. But Resurrection will come no other way. We owe it to our abused sisters to take up this particular cross, so we can move to the promised land of a free South Africa. The month of compassion must, in Christ, become lives of compassion so we will fulfil God's vision of a happy country, where men and women take their rightful place, children are truly blessed and God is glorified.