

6<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, 12 July 2020 – Year A

Gen 25:19-34; Rom 8:1-11; Matt 13:1-9,18-23

It's always a good idea to at least try to acknowledge the biases that we bring to reading scripture. In the case of this morning's epistle reading it's worth stating at the outset that I come to it with the conviction that Paul does not think that the human body is inherently evil and to be despised.

This conviction doesn't come from nowhere. In fact, like many people I assumed that Christianity taught and required that humans are, fundamentally a non-material soul and our bodies were at best some kind of shell or at worst a prison that we need to be freed from. Today, having read and written more words on the subject than I care to remember, I know that within the field of Theological Anthropology (the technical name for the Christian study of human nature) this view is called Radical Dualism.

It's now my belief that Radical Dualism is not the best way to present the biblical picture of human nature, but the idea still persists. It's quite common to lay the blame for the prevalence of dualist thinking inside the Church at the feet of French philosopher Renee Descartes but that's a bit simplistic and unfair. There have been countless philosophies, ancient and modern that include some kind of dualist anthropology which have been influential within Christianity over the centuries.

And, if you start with a dualist assumption, it's very easy to see how you would find Paul's writing to reinforce your beliefs. Paul appears to talk about the body in very negative ways, not just in Romans but elsewhere in his epistles too.

The Greek word σαρξ (*sarx*) is normally translated as flesh (think of the word sarcophagus.) In the New Testament and the Jewish and Gentile literature that might be expected to influence it, the use of this word is varied. I'm lucky to have a brand new five-volume New Testament Greek dictionary at work and the long entry on flesh is interesting reading. Paul's use here seems to reflect the post-exilic and rabbinic tendency to use the word *sarx* to highlight the transitory nature of human existence and human fallibility and propensity to sin.

Crucially, however, while writers like Paul see the propensity to sin expressed in our flesh, flesh is never said to be the cause of sin. If I'm right that this usage isn't about the body being inherently bad, then the next obvious question is "what *is* Paul saying then?" A useful way to try and understand what Paul is saying about flesh is to think about what he is contrasting it with.

In this morning's passage, Paul is contrasting flesh and spirit. Now you might think "Ah ha! There you are. Flesh and spirit, body and soul. Paul is clearly dualist." I'm perfectly willing to concede that there is a dualism in Romans but I don't think it's an anthropological dualism, it's bigger than that. The contrasts that run throughout Romans are subtly different but they all point to the same thing, the natural versus the supernatural.

In the case of this morning's passage, the translators of the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible provide some crucial evidence to support this. The word Spirit has been capitalised throughout the reading. This suggests that, in the mind of the translators, Paul is writing about a specific Spirit, the presence of the Living God, the Spirit who we know as the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit.

What's not being talked about is some vague sense of human spirit or soul which is inherently good as opposed to the body which is inherently bad. The life of the Spirit reflects presence of Jesus as opposed to the life focused only on the concerns of the natural world. This is the dualism that I think Paul is trying to communicate to the church in Rome.

It is a sad fact that the natural world does not reflect God's glory, mercy and justice as it should. I don't want to rehearse my previous sermon or Peter's from last week but the evidence of sin is all around us. Paul thinks, and I think he's right, that it's hard to live the life that we are created for in this world without the supernatural intervention of God to help us. Paul thinks that we need to be in Christ and Christ needs to be in us through the Holy Spirit. What I think is in view here is that human existence is fragile and transitory, but God is eternal and in control.

So, if I'm right and we should not read the Bible, or at least this passage, as denigrating the human body, what, if anything are we to do about it? What are the implications of recognising that, whatever else we might say about human nature, our bodies are, genuinely part of who we are? One thing that comes to mind is that this view helps us to break down the false dichotomy between saving souls and responding to human need.

I'm sure I'm not alone in having doubts about the value of trying to talk people into believing what I believe. There are still plenty of Christians, however, who appear to elevate a certain kind of evangelism above all other kinds of Christian witness. Please don't get me wrong, I think talking about our faith is vital and we should do it more often. I just happen to believe that in most cases the message of the Gospel is better received in the context of a relationship.

Even better, when God's love is clearly obvious in the way we live our lives, I suspect *that* will be far more convincing than whatever words I might use to talk about it. Again, it's not that I think telling people about our faith is in anyway a bad thing, I just object to that particular form of spreading the Gospel being treated by some as if it's the be all and end all and I think our two other readings this morning back me up.

Esau comes in from the hunt and is famished. I suspect that if Jacob had offered to buy Esau's birth right from him at any other moment, common sense would tell him that it's impossible for a younger brother to offer the firstborn anything comparable to what he would inherit from his father. The first born should expect to inherit a double share of his father's wealth compared to what Jacob would get. So, unless Jacob has some previously unknown source of wealth, it's clearly going to be a bad deal.

But, hunger has hindered Esau's judgment. In Paul's language, Esau's mind is set on the things of the flesh – and for good reason. He's not in a position to weigh the ultimate good in the situation, he just wants some food.

Jesus talks about the seed that is sown and starts to grow but is choked by thorns representing the cares of the world and desire for wealth. In this parable even the Words of Life are rendered ineffectual in the lives of the hearer by the pressure of everyday life, of life in flesh.

Sadly, schools in New Zealand have learnt this lesson. Hungry children have trouble learning. The best teacher in the country is going to struggle to get through to a child who is too hungry to concentrate. This is much like how I think of the idea of trying to talk someone into being a Christian when they are struggling to feed their family.

And, I'll just say for the third time in case anyone misunderstands me, that we absolutely should tell people about the love we know in Christ Jesus. My point is that loving service, meeting people's immediate and longer-term material needs is not something that we do instead of spreading the Gospel, it is one way that we spread it. Schools increasingly provide breakfast and lunch to children that wouldn't otherwise eat, not as an alternative to teaching but as a way to facilitate it.

Sometimes it can feel like theology is rather removed from the concerns of on-the-ground ministry. In these matters, however I think an assumed theological anthropology that

downplays the importance of our bodies has contributed to an inadequate understanding of the mission of the Church on the part of some Christians. I for one don't think that filling bellies competes with saving souls. Rather, I think that taking some pressure off someone who is struggling might help to prepare the ground for the seed of the Gospel.

It's my hope that faithful attention to scripture and the Christian tradition on the part of theologians and pastors alike will inspire the Church to strive to be heralds of the Good News. It's my prayer that each of us will continue to spread the Gospel in words and acts of loving service, but especially in the lives we live. Lives that reflect minds set on the things of the Spirit of the Eternal God.