

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 9 MARCH 2008

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Psalm 130; Romans 7: 14-25

"Are Humans Improving?"

In today's psalm, verse 7 has "with the Lord there is steadfast love, and ***with him is great power to redeem.***" Implied in those words 'great power to redeem' are three great truths:

- One: humans can go astray – down a bad path,
- Two: there is a power in the universe calling them back, and
- Three: failure need not be the end; a new beginning is always possible.

We'll return to this, but first a story to help set the scene.

One wintry Sunday in 1958 my evening service drew an unseasonable crowd. Our guest preacher was Dr Leslie Cooke, a leader in English Congregationalism, my former tradition. Leslie was a vast, heavy-set figure, sixtyish and white-haired; I was 27 and looked 20. As we mounted the high pulpit area in front of the organ, it struck me that we could be singing "All preachers great and small"! Dr Cooke floored us with the simplicity of his message. He said the task of the church was ***to help increase the number of good people in the world!***

Fifty years on I don't see that as simplistic. It seems to make eminently good sense: 'to help increase the number of good people in the world.' He didn't mean that church people were uniformly better than those who didn't go to church. Nor did he mean that one was transformed into a saint merely by walking in the door. There were no such implications. It was a simple, unadorned statement of fact: the task of the church was to help increase the number of good people in the world.

I sometimes wonder how we're doing at it – even in the church. Like most of my profession, I have wondered occasionally why God should have given some people into my care – and wished they could have been given to someone else. In that first congregation of mine were several that I didn't enjoy visiting; some were quite unpleasant. One in particular could be counted on for a mouthful when I called. I hit on what seemed like a good idea. While still in the car I wrote on my card 'called at 2.30; sorry to miss you.' I left the motor running, raced to the door and flicked my card through the mail slot. At that moment the door opened; she must have seen me come up the path!

You may know about the old parson putting a concrete edge around his rose bed. The little boy next-door was perched on the fence watching this process. Said parson was smoothing off the last little strip when the laddie overbalanced and landed 'splat' in the concrete. Unable to contain himself the old chap made no secret of his anger. A woman walking by said, "Oh, vicar! What language! Jesus loved the little children. I should have thought you would too." "Madam, I love them in the abstract, but I can't stand them in the concrete!"

Many ministers, after a hard week and maybe with a shrinking congregation, might have said something like that. At the very least, they wonder now and again if all their work is for nought. But that's not just a minister's problem. Every one of you, after a trawl through the paper and a couple of news and current affairs programs, must have wondered if the human race isn't a thoroughly bad lot and should be written off. Think of Hitler, Stalin, Idi Amin, Pol Pot, Auschwitz, Cambodia, Rwanda,

Darfur and so on. Is Leslie Cooke's statement about the task of the church just plain unrealistic? I want you to look with me at what the Bible says about humanity. You can find a glowing view, a gloomy view and a balanced view.

I

First, **the glowing view**. In Psalm 8 the ancient minstrel sings of divine majesty and human dignity.

*When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;
what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?
Yet you have made them a little lower than God,
and crowned them with glory and honour.
You have given them dominion over the works of your hands.*

This echoes a theme in the early part of Genesis. Genesis, which means 'beginning', purports to explain how the universe was formed, and gives us a potted history of humanity, including the origins of the Jewish people. The stories are properly regarded as tales from the Hebrew dreaming, or as we used to say, 'dream time'.

Four weeks ago I unpacked with you the tale of the Adams Family, appointed as God's farm managers on the estate called 'Eden' – which means 'delight'. If you were here you will remember the story has God telling Adam to 'name' the animals; that is to say, to decide their place and function in the whole scheme of things. This story reflects the belief of the Hebrew people that God has a glowing view of human possibilities. He believes in the Adams Family. It also indicates that the Hebrew people want to hold such a glowing view of human possibilities.

But then it all goes 'pear-shaped', as we say. The first thing Mr and Mrs Adams do – having been told to name the animals – is to let an animal tell them what to do. That's the significance of the snake in the story, and that is what 'sin' is – abdicating from responsibility to run God's farm with integrity. But, as I said four weeks ago, the story nonetheless conveys this great confidence that the Eternal One has in humanity. God believes in the Adams Family! But not for long, it seems. So to my second point.

II

Scripture also gives us **a gloomy view**. The other great legend in Genesis is that of Noah. In fact, like the legends of creation, there are actually two versions of the Noah story. They are interleaved, and introduce some confusion to the overall narrative. I suggest you re-read Genesis chapters 6 to 9 some time and you will see this. It has been speculated that the story originates with an actual deluge over the land. Hence periodic searches for the boat; even claims to have found its remains.

The material is introduced with a blunt declaration of God's disillusionment with humanity. The Bible says that when he saw the wickedness of humanity, God was sorry he had made us! Decided he had made a grievous error. But Noah is an upright fellow, blameless among his peers and living close to God. So God says, "Noah, you and your family are OK, but I have decided to exterminate every other human being. Build a barge, load it with breeding animals and hang on for the deluge I am sending."

Well, we're told it rained for six weeks, drowning all but Noah and his boatload. The flood took six months to subside. Finally the boat ran aground. God set a great rainbow across the sky and said,

“This will be the sign of my promise; nothing like this will ever happen again.” But God has been so exasperated with the wickedness of humanity that he has just drowned everyone else.

So you have the biblical ground for a glowing picture and also for a gloomy picture. But the bible is nothing if not realistic about humanity; there’s more.

III

So to **the balanced view** that takes account of both sides as we have sketched them. Actually, before I tell you the scriptural basis for this, I’ve a non-scriptural piece that puts it rather deftly. Geoffrey Studdert-Kennedy was a legendary British chaplain in World War I; he was nicknamed ‘Woodbine Willy’ for handing out ‘Wild Woodbine’ tobacco to the troops. He received the Military Cross for bravery. Chaplain Studdert-Kennedy wrote poetry somewhat in the style of C J Dennis.

*I’m a man, and man’s a mixture,
Right up from ‘is very birth,
There’s a part of ‘im comes from ‘eaven,
And part of ‘im comes from earth.
There’s summat as draws ‘im upwards
And summat as drags ‘im duhn,
And the consekence is that ‘e wobbles
Twixt muck and a golden crown.*

That is what I would call a balanced view of human nature. It’s another view you find in scripture, and it’s the view we all need if we’re not to get hopelessly frustrated with our own and each other’s foibles!

Paul the apostle shares the frankest of frank confessions with the Christians in Rome, in the 7th chapter of his letter to them. Probably written about 57CE (that is, well before the earliest of the gospels), it is addressed to a mixture of Jewish and gentile converts. The drift of the letter is that mechanical observance of religious customs and practices (like going to church!) doesn’t automatically produce the good life. This comes through embracing the disclosure of God in the person of Jesus, with all that means. Then Paul recounts his predicament.

“I tell you, my own behaviour baffles me. I find myself not doing what I really want to do, but doing what I really detest. Yet surely if I do things that I don’t really want to do it cannot be said that ‘I’ am doing them at all – it must be sin that has made its home in my nature. (And indeed I know from experience that the earthy side of my being can scarcely be called the home of the good.) I often find that I have the will to do good, but not the power. That is, I don’t accomplish the good I set out to do, and the evil I don’t really want to do I find I am always doing . . . In my mind I am God’s willing servant, but in my nature I seem to be bound fast to the law of sin and death. It is an agonising situation, and who on earth can set me free from the clutches of my own sinful nature? I thank God there is a way out through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

Paul says that becoming a good person is a lifetime job, but with the redeeming grace of God around us and within, it’s worth making the commitment!