

Sunday 21 September: Eighteenth Sunday after Trinity

The Quality of Mercy

Readings: 2 Corinthians 4. 1-7; Matthew 9. 9-13



Van Gogh wrote: "Today and yesterday I drew... an old man with his elbows on his knees. How beautiful this figure is."
(Wessels *A Kind of Bible*)

"For it is the God who said, let light shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us." (2 Corinthians 4.1-7)

There is an old Indian story which you may have heard before, which is told of an old man who used to carry water from the well each day in a clay water jar on a pole across his shoulders. It was a long walk from the well in the hot the sun and his problem was that the water jar he carried was cracked. By the time he reached his home most of the water he carried had seeped through the cracks and dripped onto the dry land. Each day he made the journey and each day when he reached his home the water left in the jar seemed less and less. One day on his way home the cracks seemed bigger than ever and all the water seemed to be running away the old man fell to his knees and cried out:

"Oh God this is hopeless! These cracks in my jar make a mockery of all that I have tried to do. When I reach home in the evening there is nothing to show for my hours wasted in the sun. I have achieved nothing. The water left in my jar is not even enough to satisfy my thirst. But as he called out in prayer it was as though the old man heard an answer: "Look behind you... look behind you and see the path you have taken." The old man turned around and looked behind and saw that the path he had taken each day was no longer dry and barren. Where the water had dripped from the jar, the desert was growing... a line of vegetation, flowers and vegetables, the shoots of fruit trees beginning to grow. "But I did nothing," said the old man, "how could the desert grow?" And again he heard a response: "Where you have watered others have planted." "But I only have a cracked water jar!" said the old man, "Yes," came the answer, "and I only have a cracked water jar **too** to bring my water to my land."

In his sermon two weeks ago the vicar told us that the Archbishop of Canterbury has this year just published a book on the faith and fiction of Dostoevsky. Why would the Archbishop, with all his work and the pressing concerns of a divided communion confronting him, want to write about the long for the most part tragic works of a nineteenth century Russian novelist? Was he escaping the concerns of his office into a world of fiction? Far from it, Dostoevsky's novels grapple with the human world in its extremity. As Rowan Williams writes:

Terrorism, child abuse, absent father, the fragmentation of the family, the secularisation of culture, the future of liberal democracy, the clash of cultures and identity, the nature of crime and punishment, the scandal of debt and greed – so many of the anxieties that we think of as being quintessentially twenty first century are found in the work of Dostoyevsky. These novels invite us to imagine and discover the consciousness of a solidarity, a depth, a humanity which no amount of failure, suffering or desolation could eradicate.

This is a world beneath image and marketing or anything we would like to project. It is raw humanity, unpredictable and at risk. And it is when the clay pot is cracked and broken open that issues of Christian faith are grappled with. This is the journey Rowan Williams describes through the novels of Dostoevsky, a journey which is in fact a faith journey, beneath outer projections -“to the discovery of new and unflattering self images, the abandonment of whatever feeds the dream of isolation and self-sufficiency. It is an invitation to self emptying.” This cracking open is not an act which feels noble or holy. It is more often one that leaves us powerless and in fear. And yet this is the journey which can uncover “the saving dimension, the hidden face.”

There is a moment in Dostoevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov* where the first born son Dimitri and his father stand viciously arguing before the wise and holy monk the Elder Zosima to whom they have gone for arbitration in their family dispute. Dimitri is impulsive, reckless, wasteful, angry, his behaviour is outrageous, and suddenly the monk Zosima gets up from where he has been sitting and goes over to this son Dimitri, right up close to him and sinks down onto his knees in front of him and bows down to him with a full and conscious bow touching the floor with his forehead. It is as though this wise monk has seen through the cracks, seen the Spirit of the man beneath the outrage, or perhaps seen in these cracks the suffering Dimitri will face and recognised in that suffering the humanity of the man.

Last week I went to see Chekhov's play *Ivanov* played by Kenneth Branagh. And it was a similar revelation. Here is a central character deeply flawed in mid life-crisis. Ivanov is a man deep in debt, racked by guilt at the realisation he has fallen out of love with his wife who has tuberculosis. He is suspected of having an affair with a young woman twenty years his junior. Full of self-loathing Ivanov is stripped of all reputation and yet somehow he holds us. Somehow this broken man speaks a language of depth, a human voice, a rare truthfulness about our lives. And we walk away from the theatre feeling that this humanity in all its tragedy has somehow met us at our own deepest level of need and that there is an empathy, a solidarity there, a revelation. There I am too. As we walk away my mother says “It's strange I feel closer to God than if I had been to church.” It is though we have been given an experience of mercy.

In our Gospel today Jesus says “I desire mercy not sacrifice.” He uses these words from Hosea twice in Matthew's Gospel. I desire mercy not sacrifice: he tells his critics to go and learn what this means. Mercy seems an odd word these days, rather anachronistic: “Lord Jesus Christ Son of God have mercy on me.” Mercy not at all self sufficient or successful, dependent, needy, hoping, hoping upon the mercy of God which we are told is God's nature.

Today's Gospel reading celebrates that mercy. Here is Christ calling Matthew the tax collector sitting down in his tax booth. The one whom other Jews would simply judge by those externals: a hated tax collector, a collaborator with the Roman empire, one who extorts and profits from the misery of others, is now called by God to live among those who hated him. Christ who has seen beyond the externals, seen through the booth, the sitting, the tax collecting and seen the man and been filled with the mercy of God, the same mercy as he felt for fishermen, for the blind and lame, for a woman taken in adultery or a thief on a cross. And that mercy for the recipient is a setting free and a gift. We often do not grasp this. It is a mercy in many ways too great to grasp. We think that, as is true of most forms of reward or affirmation, it needs to be earned or deserved. We think of a meritocracy. The Franciscan Priest Richard Rohr writes: "God does not love you because you are good but God loves you because God is good" and we are invited to share in that goodness. Or as Meister Eckhart said "The love by which we think we are loving God is actually the love by which God first loved us... all we are doing is completing the circle." When Matthew is called there is no examination, or judgement. For Matthew to allow himself to be chosen is the choosing, for Matthew to get up and follow is all the response required. And straight away Jesus does with this tax collector and other sinners what he does all the way through the Gospel. He sits down and eats with them. Jesus enters their house, he accepts and opens himself to the hospitality and generosity of sinners. He demonstrates clearly and for all to see that he is not ashamed to be with them or to identify himself with them. It is the witness to the broken and by the broken. It is through the cracks that the living water flows. And it is the righteous who are seen to fail to embrace the mercy of God by which they too can be saved.

Matthew the Gospel writer who we celebrate today, proclaims in his Gospel that blessing - Christ the fulfilment of all the law and the prophets. At times the demands of this Christ seem impossibly high - in fact far beyond the capacity of our broken humanity to achieve. And yet it is not we who are the achievers, but God revealed through the cracks, in the struggles, in the grief, on the edge.

The God of mercy blessing
the poor in spirit,
those who mourn,
the meek of the earth,
those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
the pure and true in heart who have let go of self deceit,
the peacemakers who have glimpsed God's mercy and longed for it for themselves.

What a relief, to get up and leave the tax booth behind; to realise you are not under judgement, but one who can be filled with God's mercy – which like water can bring life to the desert.

Vincent Van Gogh was always someone who searched to find in his life and his art that mercy of God. He lived life, like those characters from Dostoevsky, on the edge as it were. In his letters to his beloved brother Theo in 1880 he wrote these words:

It always strikes me and it is very peculiar, that when we see the image of the unutterable desolation, loneliness, poverty, or their extreme, then rise our thoughts to God. At least this is the case for me.

Today and yesterday I drew two figures of an old man with his elbow on his knees and his head in his hands. How beautiful the figure is. I have tried to express what seems to me one of the strongest proofs of the existence of God and eternity, certainly in the

infinitely touching expression of such an old man... there is something noble,
something great, something that cannot be destined for the worms.

We have this treasure in clay jars, through the mercy of God.