

A Sermon by the Reverend Dr John Spring on Sunday 18th October 2009.

Readings: Job 38. 1-7, Ps 104. 1-10, 26 Heb 5. 1-10, Mk 10. 35-45

Thank you for welcoming me as your locum priest, to work in partnership with Father Hans and the parish leadership and ministry team. Fr Hans and I will count upon your prayers as we get to know each other and look for the best way to work together to serve you over the coming time.

In terms of the organisation of the church in the Diocese of Melbourne, I am here because, in the temporary absence from duty of your Vicar, Catherine, you needed a *locum tenens* priest. Bishop Paul nominated me and the Archbishop has sent me, and here I am. But I am persuaded that, in the greater sense, it is God who has called me and has been planning my coming here for weeks, months, even years.

I have many reasons for believing this. Let me give you just one. A couple of weeks ago, the Tuesday after St Francis' Day, I rang Fr Hans to see how things were going with arrangements for my arrival. Now he did not know that St Francis has long been a vital part of my life as a priest, nor did I know of his special attachment to *Il Poverello*. However he said to me that "the spirit of St Francis" had been at work and that two members of the parish had offered the use of their house to accommodate myself and my wife.

Fr Hans's reference to Francis struck and touched me, but it did not surprise me at all because God has used St Francis many times to organise my life in his service. And now that I have read Fr Hans' St Francis' Day sermon, I am even more encouraged because, as you will see, it connects with the collect for today and the sermon I was already planning to preach. In that sermon he preached, Fr Hans said that St Bonaventura described Francis as "a morning star in the midst of a cloud". I invite you to remember that phrase "morning star". I will return to it shortly.

For these reasons and more, I am reassured that it is indeed God who has called me here to serve you and to work with Fr Hans. I only hope that, by the end of my time, you, and he, will agree with me that it was so!

When someone takes up a new appointment, it is good for them to be reminded of the basics. Starting this job today, it could hardly be more appropriate for me to hear these words from the second reading:

5Every high priest chosen from among mortals is put in charge of things pertaining to God on their behalf, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. ²He is able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is subject to weakness; ³and because of this he must offer sacrifice for his own sins as well as for those of the people.

This is a core job-description for a priest straight from Scripture. Of course, there is a great deal more to being a priest and pastor, as I am sure you know. For example, this passage says nothing about moving furniture. (From my

beginnings as a priest, I seem to have spent a great deal of time moving furniture.)

However what the passage does say expresses the heart of what it is to be a priest. The job of a priest is to deal gently with the people as their shepherd. In the name of Jesus the Great High Priest, it is also to intercede to God on behalf of the people and to offer the Eucharistic sacrifice on their behalf. So to be a priest is to be a channel of God's forgiving, healing and nourishing grace.

The passage from Hebrews 5 also contains a blunt reminder that a priest does not presume to take the job unless he or she is convinced that they are called to it. It says,

⁴And one does not presume to take this honour, but takes it only when called by God . . .

Hebrews 5, then, contains an important message for me today about my job and my calling to it.

Yet it is equally important for me to again hear Jesus' teaching about servant leadership from today's gospel reading. Jesus says,

'You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. ⁴³But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. ⁴⁵For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.'

This is not a job-description, or a reminder of the principle of vocation (as in Hebrews 5). Instead, it is a statement of *the way* the job is to be performed. It speaks about the spirit of ministry and the Christian model of leadership. So, where the first reading from Hebrews 5 gave me the "what" and the "why" of being a priest, this reading gives me the "how".

Of course, as you know, we are all priests, all members of the "royal priesthood" as St Peter says, and what I have said applies to you in your Christian life, ministry and leadership. However, it applies to the ordained minister with a special force.

I rely, then, upon you to help me, not only to *do* the job, and to do it *as one called* to it, but also to do it in the *way* and in the *spirit* Jesus himself would do it. I rely upon you to help me to serve you, and to advance your health and salvation, as individuals and as a community, for whatever time I am with you.

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Well, so much for the introduction. Now for the sermon proper.

In this sermon, I have been guided to pick up for you the **creation theme** in the collect. Last Sunday was Creation Sunday as well as St Francis' Day, but the

theme of creation arises forcefully today as well in the collect and two of the readings.

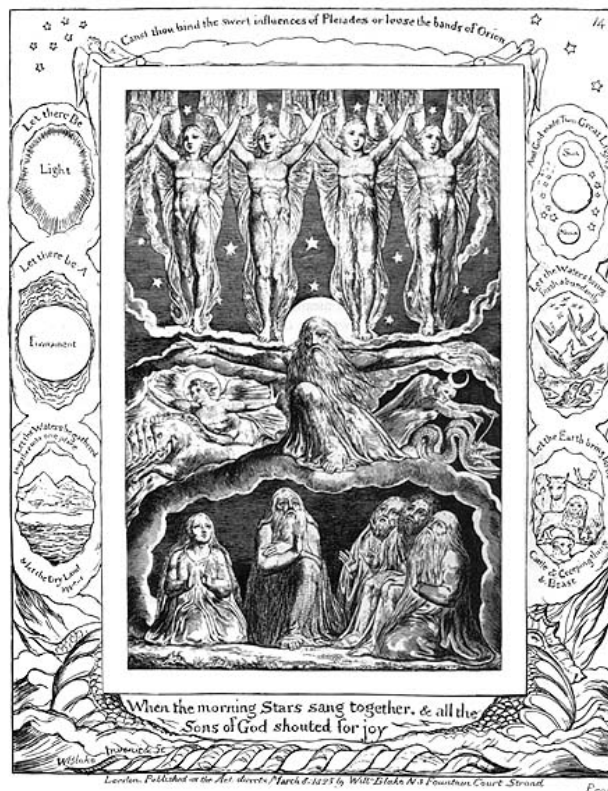
I am also guided to pick up the theme of the miracle and mystery of **redemptive suffering**, which occurs in three of the readings set for today.

1. First of all, the Creation.

The prayer for today quotes God from the Book of Job. In that book, when Job has finished his long complaint against the injustice of his sufferings, God confronts him with a string of questions which, I suppose, all come down to one question: that is, God says, "Just who do you think you are to tell me how to run the universe?" In Job 38.2-7, God says,

2 'Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? .
4'Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? . . .
5Who determined its measurements—surely you know!
Or who stretched the line upon it?
6On what were its bases sunk,
or who laid its cornerstone
7when the morning stars sang together
and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?

Whenever I read or hear this passage, my mind immediately goes to the illustration of the scene by William Blake, the late 18th Century visionary engraver and poet – of whose works the National Gallery in Melbourne holds one of the most significant collections in the world.



As with many of Blake's works, this picture can be interpreted in two completely opposite ways: a positive, cheerful way, and a grim and ominous way. This morning, I want to take the *cheerful* one.

According to the cheerful interpretation, Blake's illustration can be understood as a depiction of a loving creator God, flanked by the sun and the moon, and attended by the holy angels of light, and summoning, by his all-embracing command, all things into being under his benevolent rule.

To this loving Father God, the human beings look up in silent awe and wonder, in contemplation and prayer from a dark, cave-like space, the world of matter and flesh, of suffering, change, decay and death. From their dark cavern of material existence, they are able to behold angels and see the vision of heaven, the world of eternal light. In the knowledge and contemplation of God, these human beings, in spite of their mortality, sins and weaknesses, are spiritual and have the potential not only to see heaven above but to share in eternal life.

This cheerful interpretation also calls to my mind the Blake poem "The Little Lamb", which says

Little Lamb, who made thee?
Dost thou know who made thee?
Gave thee life, & bid thee feed
By the stream & o'er the mead;
Gave thee clothing of delight,
Softest clothing, woolly, bright;
Gave thee such a tender voice,
Making all the vales rejoice?
Little Lamb, who made thee?
Dost thou know who made thee?

Little Lamb, I'll tell thee,
Little Lamb, I'll tell thee,
He is call-ed by thy name,
For he calls himself a Lamb.
He is meek, & he is mild;
He became a little child.
I a child, & thou a lamb,
We are call-ed by his name.
Little Lamb, God bless thee!
Little Lamb, God bless thee!

It is in this spirit that humankind finds the power of vision and transcends the darkness and pain of mortal life. We experience the beauty and pleasure of God's creation. We discern the benign aspect of our Heavenly Father who commanded the creation to be; and of Jesus Christ, the Divine Word through whom the creation was made. We also discover and delight in the loving ministry of angels.

So it is that the collect for today hails God as "God of unchangeable power" and pictures this creative power as exercised **for the good**. Then it asks that we might learn from God how to do the same, "to use all things **for good**".

Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, and also of praise, and so our prayer is that we might praise God by imitating his way of using all things for good.

Yet the *Christian* life is far more than using what we are given for the good.

All human beings, whatever their beliefs, are called upon to use what they have in this world to good ends and not to evil ones. We teach our children to do so. We have the rule of law and laws to make that happen, by punishing those who think to do evil. We also reward people for doing exemplary good, and we encourage others to imitate their example.

So using all things for good is not specifically a *Christian* virtue, or even a *religious* one. It is simply a human one.

Moreover, this virtue cannot gain us salvation. At best, it can be evidence (after the fact) that one is saved, that one is *walking in the good works which God has ordained*, and that one is bearing the good fruit of faith.

What, then, is called for, as the great Christian virtue? And what must we do to be saved and to help others be saved?

This brings us to the other theme in our readings today, the theme of

2. Redemptive Suffering.

All human beings suffer, but for our suffering to be *redemptive*, we have to be faithful members of Christ. Like him we have to *learn obedience* to God through what we suffer; and we also have to use our way of suffering to help others understand him and to find in him "a source of salvation", as the writer to the Hebrews says.

But let's go back a bit and begin with Isaiah.
Isaiah 53:4-12 says that

**"All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have all turned to our own way".**

Interpreted as a prophecy of salvation in Christ, Isaiah's prophecy tells us that our healing and salvation lies in Jesus as the *suffering* servant of God who suffered for our sakes. Read this way, Isaiah describes the Messiah's sufferings vividly, saying,

**⁴Surely he has borne our infirmities
and carried our diseases;
yet we accounted him stricken,
struck down by God, and afflicted.**

**⁵But he was wounded for our transgressions,
crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
and by his bruises we are healed.**

**⁶ . . . and the Lord has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.**

So Jesus' suffering was *redemptive*, redeeming us, and delivering our lives from the tyranny of sin and guilt.

Similarly, in Hebrews 5, we hear how

7 In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. ⁸Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; ⁹and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him . . .

Jesus unflinchingly obeyed the Father and laid down his life, and we are called to obey him and follow him; and such obedience entails real sacrifice, real suffering, real cost. But the wonder and joy, the miracle and mystery of it, is that *this makes our sufferings part of his sufferings, and it makes our sufferings redemptive.*

These, then, are hallmarks of the Christian life and faith, and this is the great virtue or power of the Christian life. We are commanded, and privileged, to enter into the sufferings of Jesus. But how? We do so through "the baptism with which Jesus was baptised".

Mark 10 says,

³⁷ . . . [John and James] said to [Jesus], 'Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.' ³⁸But Jesus said to them, 'You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?' ³⁹They replied, 'We are able.' Then Jesus said to them, 'The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized . . .

Of course, John and James did not realise what he meant. They probably thought he was referring to the Baptism of John the Baptist, or that he was wanting to remind them that they had to be committed members of his team and not lose their nerve.

They did not know he was talking about living in obedience even unto death, a baptism of blood, baptism in their own blood.

But why did they need to do this?

They needed to because, to be saved, and to help others to salvation, they had to enter into, and share in, the work of Christ's redemptive suffering and self-sacrifice.

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Now, I having said all this, you are perhaps wondering how you are meant to bring these two things together – creation and redemptive suffering. I could try

to tell you. For example, it crossed my mind that, because of human greed, selfishness and stupidity, it is the Creation which suffers, but that the suffering of creation for our sins has no redemptive power. The natural world groans in torment, as St Paul says, and we ourselves, but no good comes of it unless we labour in Christ to bring forth a new creation – unless we allow God to change us and unless God brings his kingdom in.

However, I have not been given a way of bringing everything together but what has been running through my mind these last two weeks is a hymn by William Cowper. I think God may be using it to say something about the creation and redemptive suffering, about how we experience the world and what we are called to do about it. It is called “God moves in a mysterious way”, and I would like to end by reading it you.

First, let me tell you a little about the hymn-writer. The *Cyberhymnal* website records that William Cowper often struggled with depression and doubt and tells the story that, one night, he decided to commit suicide by drowning himself. He called a cab and told the driver to take him to the Thames River. However, thick fog prevented them from finding the river and, after driving around lost for a while, the cabby finally stopped and let Cowper out. To Cowper’s surprise, he found himself on his own doorstep. Cowper concluded that God had sent the fog to keep him from killing himself and that, even in our blackest times, God watches over us.

Perhaps you are troubled with the state of creation, by what human kind is doing to the earth and how we fail and even refuse to use what we have for the good? Perhaps it disturbs you to see how we persistently turn God’s good gifts to evil ends? Or perhaps you are struggling with suffering in your own life? Or maybe you are facing the challenge of understanding how anyone’s suffering can be redemptive. Where is God in your suffering?

If any of these questions are yours, perhaps there is perhaps an answer here for you. The hymn says,

**God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform;
He plants His footsteps in the sea
And rides upon the storm.**

**Deep in unfathomable mines
Of never failing skill
He treasures up His bright designs
And works His sovereign will.**

**Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take;
The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy and shall break
In blessings on your head.**

**Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust Him for His grace;**

**Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.**

**His purposes will ripen fast,
Unfolding every hour;
The bud may have a bitter taste,
But sweet will be the flower.**

**Blind unbelief is sure to err
And scan His work in vain;
God is His own interpreter,
And He will make it plain.**

John Spring