

SERMON: 2017/10/22 - BTR

[Invite children to sit on the floor at the front. Pull out a magnetic white-board on an easel with a "spinner" in the middle and the words "Good" and "Bad" written at 11 and 1 o' clock respectively.]

How *good* are you?

[Looking at the adults.] This question concerns the very heart of the Christian message. And we will be retuning to it next week when we consider Martin Luther and his legacy.

So, what's the answer?
How *good* are you?

Go on: show me using this "spinner." Show us how good you think you are.

[Ask for a (young) volunteer to approach the board and spin the arrow.]

Oh, that's interesting.
And does your mum/dad agree?

[Repeat process with another child.]

Hm.
Did you notice how nobody - sincerely - thought that they were *very* bad.
Most of us are accustomed to thinking that we're pretty alright.
Some room for improvement, sure; but not terrible.

And that seems uncontroversial, doesn't it?

I mean, when you compare yourself to *murderers*, terrorists, or convicted criminals, it seems reasonable to say: "Well, I'm much better than they are."

But what about the *other* end of the spectrum?

[Point to "good" on the board] Where *is* that "pole"?

Have you thought about that?

If we're going to engage in any kind of comparisons - if we're saying that the answer to the question: "Are you good?" is *relative*, we're probably assuming that the extremes are fixed and embodied by other people; identifiable and "within reach."

But what if [tap "good" on the board] this is much, much, *much* farther away than the other one is close? [Pause.]

Sorry, that's a very tricky question for you lot [looking at the children.] But [look up at the cong.] it really matters.

Well, in our reading today from the Old Testament, we heard about how Moses, after he'd destroyed the Ten Commandments in a fit of rage when he saw the "Golden Calf" (idol) that the Hebrews had made, went back *up* the mountain of Horeb to see God about obtaining a replacement set.

And so he climbed up and up and disappeared once more into the clouds where God was "sitting" on the summit.

And do you know what God said when Moses told Him that he'd - *literally* - broken the Ten Commandments?

He sympathised!

He forgave Moses, saying, essentially: "Now, don't you worry: they're a very stubborn, 'stiff-necked' people. But here, let me make you some new ones." And that's what He did!

In chapter 34 [of *Exodus*], we hear that God Himself, the creator of the universe, personally crafted two *new* stone tablets for the Hebrews with the law engraved into them.

Now, how did He do it?

Well, in some Jewish folk-tales, God is imagined (in this moment) as a wizened, old rabbi in a shawl, with really long payot and a beard, hunched over a desk, writing them out carefully by hand; which I think is a charming, *winsome* image [n.1]; but not all what the Bible says: 'God is spirit' [Jn. 4:24].

Anyway, before Moses returned to the people with the new Ten Commandments, he asked for a sign of "favor." - He wanted some encouragement; an unmistakable sign of solidarity from the Lord (of Heaven). And so God agreed to 'pass' by him so that Moses would be able to glimpse God's 'goodness.' [Ex. 33:19] - *This*, we're told, is the glory of God [v.22]. But God's 'goodness' was so amazing, so fantastic, so *beautiful*, that He warns Moses not to look directly at it, 'for [it would kill a human being] [Ex. 33:20]'

So, he hides Moses in the shade of some rocks and tells him to only look out of the corner of his eye and only for a brief moment.

And it was so bright!

God's 'goodness' - even from behind [v.23] - was like the surface of the sun. Unbearable and terrifying and wondrous.

Let's pray: Father God, help us, by Your Holy Spirit, to understand who you

really are - magnificent beyond imagining - and, by doing that, to love you more. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.

[Ask children to depart]

What about you?
Are you "good"?

This is a hard lesson "to swallow," but the Bible is very clear - and I'd say realistic - about human nature and the fleeting, ephemeral moral quality.

For a long time, in the early modern era - after industrialisation, that is, lots were optimistic about (our) "progress."
Science and invention were improving our "condition" in leaps and bounds.

And then two world wars hit.
Millions dead.
Millions.

And not just on the field of battle.
Men and women were herded like (dumb) cattle to their deaths in abattoirs built by a nation that had prided itself on its "enlightenment" - on its poetry and philosophy and so on.

The USSR was another disastrous attempt at utopia.

And China.

And Cambodia.

And Iran.

And North Korea.

The list goes on and on.

And yet still the Mark Zuckerbergs of the world think all we need is just more technology to fix things. He's claimed Facebook will end terrorism, climate change - *even illness* [n.2].

But this idealism - this *presumption* - depends on us being *inherently* "good"?
Are we, though?

You know, even Jesus rejected the label.
In *Mark* 10 [v.17-18], he's called the "good teacher" by the rich young ruler, and he *sharply* "swats" the compliment away.
And *that* should make you stop and think.

Why did *He* do that?

After all, He's the good-est person out there, right?

The Anointed One. The "Prince of peace" [Is. 9:6].

'Perfect', says the the author of *Hebrews* 5, verse 9. [Pause.]

I think it helps when we do this:

[Remove the second 'o' from the word "good" on the board.]

"Good" is actually *derived* from the word "God."

That's its root.

And that's its real meaning.

So, to rephrase our enquiry: How "*God*" are you?

And that's how you should consider that question.

So, look inside. Ask yourself.

Now the answer seems clear, doesn't it?

Not at all.

Not in the slightest.

This [gesture to own body] withers and ages and is corruptible - *in every sense* of that term.

And as such it is, no one could deny, completely *ungod*(-like).

And, therefore, *completely* unsuitable for the new Creation to be established when Jesus returns, which will be a place to suit *Him* and *His* reign [See: Rev. 21:3], which is to say it will be a place of the *infinite* and the *unchangeable* [See: Is. 66:22] - qualities that none of - as creatures - possess.

But not just that, it will be a place of utter, flawless, *consummate* harmony.

That's how Isaiah sees it.

In [chp.] 11 [v.] 6, he foresaw this - and I quote: 'The wolf shall live with the lamb, [and] the leopard shall lie down with the kid'. 'They shall not hurt or destroy [each other]', [65:25].

But that's what people do all the time!

"Hurt" and "destroy" each other - with our words, with our actions, with our tribalism and prejudices, and our gossip...

Haven't you seen, 'The Bold and the Beautiful'?

The irony is is that they're so cowardly and ugly on that show - on the inside at least. Outwardly they're *freakishly*, enviously gorgeous.

And I see those cowardly, ugly elements in me - and in my relationships.

Even in my interactions with Rebekah, who is the love of my life!

So, how could *I* sustain *perfect* relations with *everyone* in paradise *forever*?
I (simply) couldn't.
But that's what it requires.

We are, then - and this is my point, completely unsuitable for that place - as much as if you "zapped" me right now to the surface of (the planet) Venus: where the temperature is 870 degrees fahrenheit - that's hot enough to melt lead; and the atmospheric pressure is *ninety* times what it is here, enough to squash me flat as a pancake; and the rain consists not of water, which would evaporate, obviously, but face-melting concentrated sulphuric acid.
Seriously, check it out on Wikipedia!

As I am, then, I wouldn't survive there.
Not only that, but my very being would not have developed there in the first place. The conditions are completely "at odds" with life as we know it: and this is the same issue we face in terms of salvation as resurrection to new life in the eschatological Kingdom.

What's needed, then, is for all this [gesture to own body, heart in particular] to be *transformed* - to be made something *entirely* different.

And that's why "going to Heaven" isn't about doing a little bit better or trying a little harder; *nor* is it a place where most of us can just assume that we'll "slide" in (as we are).

No, we need someone who does belong there - who is *of* there [Jn. 6:46] - to show us some "favor" - *and that's Christ(!)*; to bestow on us a "power" of 'imitation' of Him, so that we *might* become fit, and so escape 'the wrath that is coming.'- those are Paul's words from this morning's *Thessalonians* passage. [1, 1:5-10]

That "wrath" is the expulsion or, if you prefer, the "denial," of those who *remain* unsuitable for what is to come (at the end of time), and we can't dismiss this threat as a later development in the thinking of the Church: to scare obedience into the ignorant.

He was drawing on a theme clearly taught by Jesus.

Reflect back on some of the parables that we've had read to us in recent weeks; how, for example, the king who, in Matthew's gospel, arranged a wedding banquet and then threw those guests who refused to come into 'outer darkness', [22:1-14].

It is true that this particular tale isn't repeated in *Mark*, the earliest gospel to be written, and that's curious; but no *serious* scholar questions its authenticity.

And so what do we learn?

That all that those potential guests had to do was merely *accept* the invitation - to make the choice - and the journey - to a party that will transcend our highest hopes.

Will you?

Footnotes:

1. Neusner, Jacob (2001), *The Incarnation of God: The Character of Divinity in Formative Judaism*, Binghamton: Global Publications, 16-18.
2. See: Condliffe, Jamie (17th February 2017), 'Mark Zuckerberg Has Laid Out His Vision of a World United by Facebook', *MIT Technology Review*, available at <https://www.technologyreview.com/s/603683/mark-zuckerberg-has-laid-out-his-vision-of-a-world-united-by-facebook/>