

Sermon: 2020/07/19 (7th Sunday after Pentecost, Year A) - Genesis 28:10-19a; Psalm 139:1-11,22-23; Romans 8:12-25; Matthew 13:24-30,36-43_BTR

["Dry-wipe" (white-)board; a pile of fist-sized rocks.]

So Jacob - son of Isaac, grandson of Abraham - was on an adventure to find a wife. He was taking a *long(!)* journey, *all by himself*, to the north country. And on his way, tired with very sore feet, he lay down to sleep. And as he slept he dreamt. He dreamt He saw what's often translated as a 'ladder', but which was actually, more probably, a...*ziggurat*. What's a "ziggurat," you ask?

[Begin drawing.]

A ziggurat was a step-pyramid. A *huge* structure, which you could see from miles and miles away in the flat lands of Mesopotamia. It was a bit like an artificial mountain, and at the top of that "artificial mountain" pagan priests would gather - no one else was allowed - to feel closer to "the gods." Of course, the (many) "gods" they believed in weren't really real; they weren't actually there - at the top of the ziggurats.

But the true God *did* appear on Jacob's dream-ziggurat. And the sight of Him, *blazing* with glory and surrounded by angels, inspired Jacob with confidence to continue on his lonely quest. Which is why, in the morning, when he woke, he decided to do something that we might think was strange. He made a simple structure out of stones in a pile. And I think I know what he trying to do:

[Begin stacking the stones, wide base to a point.]

Can you see?
He built his own (mini-) ziggurat!
Which is to say, he decided to *memorialize* the dream...
And we too might make copies of a symbol that inspires us.
Many Christians carry a cross on a necklace or hang one in their churches.
Not because they want to crucify anyone on it!
But in order to have a *concrete* reminder of the *real* one where Jesus died to save us from our sins.

Let's pray: ...

[Dismiss children back to their seats.]

'Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, and **throw** [cast] them into the fiery furnace.' [Mt. 13:40-42a]

Let's talk about Hell.

You know, for us Episcopalians there probably isn't a more uncomfortable topic!
If theology were bedding, then this subject would be sheets made of sandpaper.
Hot, itchy "sandpaper."
We would rather sleep naked, right?
On the floor.
In winter.
In public.
Than discuss 'fire' and damnation.
And yet, we find Jesus doing both this morning.

Notice that He continues to speak of the same *after* having concluded the parable, which is to say *after* the metaphor has ended.

That is to say, when He speaks of fire and punishment - *of Hell* - He isn't speaking *symbolically*: oh no.
And that's the temptation, isn't it?

(For us.)

To put Hell in parentheses, as if it were a mere euphemism, and to talk instead about the "hell" of repeatedly making poor, short-sighted life-choices.

The "hell" of addiction - to pornography, alcohol, "pain-pills," or whatever.

The "hell" of modern war in places like Syria.

The "hell" of being a mental-health sufferer;

the "hell" of parenting a disobedient, petulant child.

Or, alternatively, the "hell" of childlessness; of infertility...

But these things are "hells" only insofar as they offer a foretaste; a glimpse, *insight* into something that is also and equally real:

The Hell waiting for the unrepentant on Judgment Day.

Hell isn't, then, to Jesus' mind, just a "bogeyman" - a pretense - to incentivise church-attendance: to scare the uneducated and the ignorant into the pews on a Sunday.

And to open their wallets too, I guess.

Rather, Jesus' purpose was to simply to lay the facts before us.

- *And remember*:

as much as we may wish to reject such "facts" - it is the Savior, the one who returned from the grave having visited "the other side," who volunteers them.

And so to the person who would say "Well, I think differently."

To the person who would tell you: "I don't believe that there is a looming, *punitive* judgment awaiting all of humanity." - To that person I would say:

"Who are you to know better than Christ?

Did your body lie in the grave three days and then you rose again?

Did you 'descend to the dead' (as it says in The Creed), and preach the Gospel to the souls of our ancestors languishing there?

What *evidence* have you to present us that contradicts the eternal, pre-existent Messiah, who sat with God in Heaven before the universe began? And sits with Him today."

(There is none.)

In fact, what *is* fascinating is that the point Jesus was trying to impress on His audience wasn't even really *about* Hell.

That is to say, His object wasn't to *inform* them of Hell's existence; of its reality.

Actually, He *presumes* they already agree.

After all, His own lesson was drawing on various "pointers" provided in the Old Testament.

Thus the Jews standing on the lakeshore that day took for granted that a God who loves *has* to love justice too; that there would be, eventually a dreadful Day of reckoning.

Rather, Jesus' theme; His topic; His *focus* was *tolerance*.

"Tolerance" (in the here-and-now).

His principal aim was to address the perennial question of peaceful coexistence among mankind - how it is to be attained; how it is to be maintained.

In the Church.

In a congregation like this.

In a community, a nation.

In America.

And we desperately need to hear this!

Because, right now, people are being cast out of their jobs,
cast out of political-office,
cast out of business,
cast out of the Academy...[n.1]

Why?

For thinking wrong things.

(And when I say *that* word - "wrong," I *do* want you to, mentally, add parentheses; "chicken-scratches.")

Saying or tweeting the "wrong" thing.

For being the "wrong" color.

Even for dating the "wrong" people.[n.2]

For voting for the "wrong" party, or expressing support for the "wrong" presidential candidate.

You know, I think of poor ol' Bishop William Love - the episcopal bishop of Albany, who may be about to be cast out of the episcopate - out of his bishopric, out of his "see" - because of his unfashionable, conservative, *Biblical* stance on marriage.

Soon you will be cast out of Walmart, Kroger and most other places for not wearing a mask!

Though I do concede that there is at least another factor "at play" in the matter - and that's public health, but I digress....

You know, today's parable is one of a *bloc* of parables, told in quick succession; and this section; this "bloc" - when it ends - is immediately followed by Jesus *Himself* being cast out - "cast out" of His home synagogue in Nazareth by a mob of His relatives and neighbors: [13:53-58]. (Matthew doesn't describe this shameful episode in full, but *Luke* tells the whole, ugly story: [4:28-29].)

And, immediately prior to these parables, Jesus exorcised 'a demon-oppressed man who was blind *and* mute' who had been cast out from his village for unpredictable, erratic behavior: [12:22f.].

Our "bloc," then, in *Matthew*, is flanked, "book-ended" - either side - by "castings."

And my point is that what we see is that so-called "cancel culture," far from being unique to 2020 - was a big thing during Jesus' earthly ministry in the first century too.

And He wants *nothing* to do with it.

It is the target of His teaching; of His anger.

For being antithetical to the Gospel; for being *deeply un-Christian*.

The problem with "casting" out, you see, or *cancelling*, of course, is that it prevents; *precludes any* possibility of discussion;

of changing and "winning hearts and minds."

And isn't that preferable?

A better outcome?

And it comes from a place of absolute certainty in one's own *rightness*.

About one's own *correctness*.

But none of us deserves to have such self-assuredness.

Such certainty.

Opinions are just that: opinions.

And, unlike God and Scriptures, they change.

They change *all* the time:

Today's common-sense is tomorrow's bigotry.

Which is why - to return to the parable (directly) under discussion - Jesus teaches that any casting out is to be left to The Harvester: 'The Son of Man' [Mt. 13:41].

That is, God Himself.

Only *He* has all the facts;

only *He* can make the final determination (as who should be cast where).

We - you and I - are to take a different approach.

(One more appropriate to our sinful, limited natures.)

To quote Paul from *Romans* - to "wait with eager longing for the (final) revealing." [8:19]

(For Jesus to return.)

This is our task.

To *abide* with each other: to find ways to deal with difference and divergence - even perceived prejudice - *graciously*.

This is our challenge and opportunity, amen.

Footnotes:

1. See, for example: <https://www.nationalreview.com/2020/06/cancel-cancel-culture/>; <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/07/cancel-culture-and-problem-woke-capitalism/614086/>; or, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/14/opinion/cancel-culture-.html>
2. See: <https://nypost.com/2020/07/08/jodie-comer-canceled-over-supposed-trump-supporting-boyfriend/>