Sermon. Sunday 20 October 2024: Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost

Today's readings are all, in one way or another, about limits, about reminding us to know our own limits, to pace ourselves in what we do. In reminding us that we are limited, they're also telling us not to be disappointed at our inevitable failures to achieve whatever we might once have aspired to achieving. Let's look at them, working backwards from the gospel.

James and John, the brothers, who carry the nickname 'sons of thunder' – which gives us a bit of an idea of their story and perhaps domineering characters – ask a favour. In your kingdom, when you come to power, how about you let us sit at your right hand and your left? In the places where we can be your chief advisors. And there's a bit of a hint here of 'we know what's best, and we'll be happy to advise you on the most efficient way of getting things done.' Jesus says: you don't know what you're asking; you don't know what you're letting yourselves in for – certainly you'll be there, but it won't be pleasant – Jesus referring forward to his own crucifixion. Jesus' baptism will be his death.

One of our visitors last Sunday afternoon said to me – 'I like the padded seats, you don't often get that in churches, but I'm not sure about the big icon at the back: I find that a bit scary.' And then, But I suppose all art is meant to make you think. It struck me that's a fair comment about a baptism icon, and about baptism itself – it's confronting, because while it's about a dying to new life, that involves a dying.

The disciples get angry at the brothers, but Jesus cautions all of them: don't any of you think you can be first of all, without being servant of all. James and John have

had the boldness to put the question, but maybe each of the disciples had been secretly wanting this sort of favoured position, so Jesus has used this incident to say something about the nature of the future reign of God he is initiating. It involves recognising our limits.

The Hebrews reading also is about recognition of limits – each high priest serves for a limited time only – the writer is talking to Jewish Christians, or Christians of Jewish background, and uses their knowledge of the Jerusalem temple worship (which had come to an end by this time, after 70 AD) to say something of the new sort of priesthood offered by Christ. Priesthood, he or she (we don't know who wrote Hebrews) says, is about mediation between God and ourselves – that's what the Jewish high priests did, in the temple. The priesthood of these priests was always limited in scope, by the limits of their own lifetimes; but even more so now because the Temple had been destroyed and all its services had come to a violent and sudden end. The writer is saying, don't be surprised at this – the temple was always limited, we just thought it would be there forever. But in the end it was always a human institution, and nothing of this sort lasts forever. What we now have instead is an eternal mediator, in a temple not built by human hands.

The Psalm. The Psalm contains the famous line about the nature of water, or the waters (plural): 'They went up to the mountains, they went down by the valleys:
to the place which you had appointed for them. You fixed a limit which they may not pass: they shall not return again to cover the earth.'

If only that were true in a time of climate change and rising sea levels. The water will still run down the mountainside to its appointed place, just not quite so far down. So what could the world be telling us in this interesting phenomenon? Interesting for us, but probably that's not the word you'd use if you lived in Bangla Desh or on one of the Pacific islands.

Then in the OT reading we come to perhaps the strongest assertion of our human limitations, in God's response to Job. Now Job has had a rough time, you have to admit – pretty much everything has gone badly for him, and he's been complaining for the last 37 chapters of the Book of Job, with some rather unhelpful friends telling him he'll be fine and not to worry. Finally God gives him an answer to his complaints, but not the answer he'd been hoping for: 'Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?' And the monologue goes on: 'where you there when the world came into being, when I called it into being?

When I try to explain the creation stories to teenagers at school, and they sometimes want to either accept or reject the biblical account with a too literal interpretation (and I do get both responses at times – literal acceptance or literal rejection, so I just say: well, was there anyone sitting there taking notes, when the world was coming into being? – so of course this is a mythic story, one that attempts to something about the nature of what is real.

In the story of Job – God says exactly this: were you there taking notes? And Job is everyman, in a way – he represents humanity in general, all of us who struggle with understanding what goes wrong in the world and why. Our understanding is limited,

because we are finite creatures. This doesn't mean we can't complain – read the psalms and you'll find lots of complaining, and in the bible you'll also find lots of action to try to change the world. In fact this is what we do here – praying for the coming of God's kingdom where the world will be different, and working to discern and respond to the signs of this kingdom when we see them, in whatever way we can. So it's not a counsel to quietism or apathy. In fact it's the opposite: a call to action, but with the caveat: don't lose heart when our actions don't appear to amount to anything significant, because we can never see the endpoint of our actions.

I'll finish with a story: Back in the 1840s, the Congregationalist missionary Lancelot Thelkeld learnt the language of the aboriginal Awabakal people he worked with in Western NSW, and translated several books of the Bible. In doing this, as historian Marilyn Lake points out, Thelkeld was one of the few Europeans who refused to accept the common opinion of his day that the Aboriginal people were a 'dying race'. But as the last of the native speakers was dying, and more an more of the people speaking English, Thelkeld thought the significance of his own work would die with him; he believed he'd lived a useless life. Now, 150 years later, his translations are being used by descendants to revive the use of their own traditional language, and it's turning out to be one of the best documented Aboriginal languages in the country. The outcome mightn't be exactly what Thelkeld had had in mind, because he was also a man of his own times, but it's certainly an outcome for which we can all be grateful. Don't lose heart: whatever we do in life, God will make use of – we can be sure of that.