

God is on our side

Sermon Sep 27 2015

Mark 9:38-41 - James 5:13-20 - Psalm 124 - Romans 8 31-39

Vu 652 Be still my soul for God is on your side

May God be with us as we consider the message for today.

I hope you're not looking for simple answers today because I have none. Only questions to share.

To start off, what do we mean when we say, as the hymn says, God is on our side?

We may mean that God is inwardly with us, regardless of circumstances. That's I think what Paul means when he writes in Romans, "If God is for us, who can be against us? (nothing) will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. "

Today's Gospel shows Jesus saying that doing good is good, pretty much regardless of your affiliations. Healing people, offering drink to the thirsty etc are good deeds regardless of what teacher - or God - you profess to follow.

James talks of the power of prayer. He tells us that prayer – communion with God – can and does affect the world around us. Every Sunday in this church we do pray to God to intervene. We thank God for keeping us safe in danger - we ask God to watch over our children, to be with those who are sick – we expect God to be active in this world, not a passive bystander. It is God's world after all!

But what happens when God-fearing, good people ask God for diametrically opposite results?

When the psalmist says, as we just read, The Lord is on our side, I think he means God is actively fighting for Israel against its human enemies on the battlefield. (Ps. 124). God intervened to save Israel from destruction - by killing other people.

Do you remember a while ago Bev was leading us through Genesis? She went back and back to God's first great promise to Abraham and Sarah. Remember – God promised them three things.

a land

descendants, as many as the stars in the sky

God would always be with them.

Three religions claim to be descendants of that promise. Jews - Moslems - Christians. All say they are metaphorically the children of Abraham. Over the millennia they have fought bitterly, and are still fighting, about who gets that land and whose side God is really on.

That promised land has been much fought over. From the fall of the Roman Byzantine Empire and the rise of Arab Islam, through the Persian Empire, the Turkish Empires, the Christian Crusades, the Ottoman Empire, the British Empire, the independent Arab states, the establishment of Israel – conflict has abounded. Today in that area we have Sunni Moslems and Shiite Moslems, Jews and Christians and non-religious people.

There are good people on all sides trying to get along, trying to work out what is fair to all. And there are extremists on all sides claiming that God is on their side and their side alone, against all others.

How do we know? Is God is on my side – am I on God's side? Is what I do God's work?

How do we react to people who say “I am doing God's work” as they do dreadful deeds? And they genuinely believe it.

Our own society, our own church has not been immune. Great harm has been done in the name of Christ. And still is. In our history we only have to think of the Crusades – the centuries of anti-Semitism – the Inquisition – Catholics persecuting Protestants and Protestants persecuting Catholics – how missionary work was too often co-opted into approving something like slavery - residential schools and their aftermath.

And most of us as individuals can probably look back and cringe a bit at some things we have said and done. Of course we meant well. But we may not have always done it.

Sheila grew up in Britain at the time of the “Troubles” in Ireland - the IRA bombings, the Unionist killings, the discrimination and hatred on both sides, the involvement of the British army. On all sides God-fearing church-goers. On all sides support from their respective churches. And also on all sides dissenting voices talking of reconciliation. And on all sides ordinary people just wanting to be left alone to live their lives in peace.

It struck Sheila even then as a teenager that it was utterly insane that people were genuinely believing that wrongs of hundreds of years ago were still relevant. The Battle of the Boyne was over in 1690, it seemed crazy to still be fighting it in the 1970s. Especially when my own parents were able to politely welcome Germans into our house when they were both actively involved in fighting World War 2.

Now I understand a little more how old hatreds are passed on and perpetuated in daily life when communities are separated by mistrust and daily wrongs.

We shake our heads over the turmoil in the Middle East. The age old hostilities, the feeling on every side that what we do is justified, in the name of God, for our people.

Sheila has been reading a really good book Bev lent her, the *Lemon Tree*. It puts a human face on an insoluble problem. When two families both have good claim, a good legal and moral and emotional claim, to one house. When two peoples both have good claim to one land. There is no solution while all claim their inalienable rights.

There is no solution when extremists on both sides justify their actions by the actions of other extremists. When people live in fear and ignorance of the reality of the other.

And when God is invoked as being on our side and ours only, approving our actions, fighting the enemy for us.

And never mind the Middle East, how do we deal with the well-meaning but completely wrong person in the neighbouring church? Or in the next pew?

We say or think, Jesus never meant that! How can you say that Jesus wants us to do ... fill in the blank.

How can you not agree that we must immediately put all our efforts into Fill in the blank.

Canada is immersed in politics right now, now we are not going to get into party politics.

But there are great and very worthwhile debates about what we want this country to be like. And how do we get there from here?

What are our priorities? How will we pay for what we want? What are our responsibilities to each other, to other countries and other peoples, to our lovely planet? What must we give up for the sake of others? For the sake of God – God who created and ultimately owns it all, lock stock and barrel? Whose side is God on?

How do we know? No easy answers in ordinary human life.

Even less are there easy answers in our spiritual life.

So what do we do? If anything?

I don't think we have the option of saying, just give up and do nothing. It's true that if we have no easy answers the safe thing is to do nothing, to stop trying, to close our eyes to all the wrongs around us. After all we might be wrong.

But being too afraid of being wrong is paralysing. Remember the parable of the talents? Two servants took the money their master entrusted to them and set it to work. They risked getting in the business world. But the third was too afraid he might lose it so he did nothing. That was not approved of.

It's maybe simplistic to say we do the best we can with what we know now. But it's the best answer I have. We accepting that we don't know everything and we cannot foresee how things will turn out, but we do the best that we know how given the understanding we have.

I think we do need to keep a little humility. I think we have to remember that we've been wrong before. As individuals, as a church, as a society, we're not immune to error.

And we maybe need to be a bit wary of people who claim that they ARE immune to error.

Maybe we need to be open to listening to other ideas.

But we have to go on.

God is with us.

God is with us all. Amen.