

Reflection

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Romans 10:8b-13

Luke 4:1-13

What do you think about when you hear a reference to the “heart?”

Allow time for feedback.

These connotations are all important and some of them have travelled through our European history. However, the ancient Greeks had a rather different understanding of the heart to what we have today. One author writing about the ancient understanding of the heart says:

Ancient Greeks believed the heart was the source of emotions. There were 2 souls in the body: psyche in the brain was the eternal life soul, and thymos in the heart controlled emotions and desires. Homer wrote in the Iliad (762 BCE), “Hateful to me as the gates of Hades is that man who hides one thing in his heart and speaks another”.

Early Greeks believed the heart was determinate of life: whether human or god... and love came from the heart.

What this emphasises for us is that “believing with our heart” is something more than simply ticking off a checklist of ideas to which we subscribe. The idea that faith is simply about ideas is a misuse of Luther’s theology of “justification by faith alone.”

Our Epistle and Old Testament readings today are both statements of faith followed immediately by the practical implications of those statements. The Deuteronomy reading is often titled something like “First fruits offering,” which is correct, but does not tell the full story. The statement of faith section outlines the history of coming from an itinerant tribal group, and a group who were oppressed in a foreign land, to being looked after and settled in their new land. It reminds the people to look after those who are struggling as the Israelites did as slaves in Egypt. Indeed, if we read on a little further, we would discover these first fruits offerings are to be given to the vulnerable – the widows, orphans, foreigners – as well as the Levites. The practical outcome of this statement of faith that looks back to their time as slaves before looking forward to the present, is to remind the people to treat the vulnerable in their land as they were treated by Yahweh when they were foreigners.

It is a bit harder to see the practical implications of the statement of faith in our Romans reading. In this passage we see two of the earliest baptismal affirmations. The first of these is about confessing Jesus as Lord, and the second being there is neither Jew nor Greek. This latter affirmation is later expanded and we see it in several different forms in the writings of Paul. It is also this latter affirmation that I am calling as the practical outcome of the statement of faith, though in our familiarity we may well miss this.

In Australia we live in a very egalitarian society. Whilst we might find cultural and/or language differences challenging, we would not discount another person simply because of the job they do or where they live. This egalitarianism is even more pronounced in some of our younger generations who have learnt to simply roll with the cultural differences and see such difference as a positive. It was not the case in New Testament times, particularly in Greco-Roman culture.

The Greco-Roman culture of New Testament times was highly stratified. It worked with a system of patronage and everyone knew exactly where they stood in that society. Slaves were the bottom of society and women were even lower. The various castes did not mix socially at all. Add to this that in Jewish society there was a strict adherence to dietary laws, which meant that except for the corrupt rulers who did so for political power, many Jewish people would not dine with their Gentile neighbours. After all, how could they invite a Gentile to dine with them when they could not accept a reverse invitation? And so, in proclaiming that there is neither Jew nor Gentile the early church broke down those traditional barriers that kept people separate and stopped them from relating to each other.

The full version of this baptismal statement is found in Galatians: "There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." Whilst the additional categories of people are not mentioned here and the standardisation of liturgy is many years away, this passage is likely to call to mind the universality of what baptism into Christ means and it is probably narrowed down to these categories because of how it fits within Paul's broader argument at this point.

This, then, is the practical outcome of this baptismal statement of faith – we are all one in God and what gets in the way of that unity will be set aside. Regardless of diverse backgrounds, Paul calls the church to look after all its members and to care for them.

And what of our Gospel reading? In many ways this is another statement of faith in story form (and the story form gives us some of the practical implications). In New Testament times there were many expectations about the Messiah – what he would be like, what power he would have, and such like. Of course, much of this focused on the expectation the Messiah would be an alternate King who would come in and sweep the nasty Romans out of Israel and set up the Reign of God as an alternate political reality. Today's reading shows otherwise. It shows Jesus being tempted by these self-understandings and saying "no" to each of them.

Our way of understanding God shapes who we are and how we relate to the world and the story of the temptation tells us about those understandings that Jesus rejected about what it means to be the Messiah. For those who are coming to the Lenten Series that starts on Tuesday, we will be exploring our understandings of God and how they shape our lives. What ideas do we need to develop further, what images do we hang onto, and what are understandings that are hurtful to ourselves or others?

In the With Love to the World notes this week there was reference to a Robin Mann song that we have not sung (or at least, have not sung since I have been here). As we listen to (and/or sing) this song, what understandings of God have been helpful for you? What ones might be let go?