

Sermon for Matins, Mothering Sunday March 14th, 2021

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Readings:

Ephesians 2:1-10 (sin to grace)

John 3:14-21 (darkness to light, death to life, condemnation to salvation)

It's been a long time since I sat with my children on the floor of a playgroup singing the nursery rhyme 'The Hokey Cokey'. I can't pretend to understand anything of the meaning of that song, let alone the significance of the various different body parts or why we have to bend our knees, stretch our arms, and shout 'ra ra ra' at the end of it. But children and adults alike seem to enjoy singing it, and there is something rather beautiful at the end when everyone jumps into the circle, putting their 'whole selves in'.

That phrase 'whole self in' feels particularly poignant this morning as we are gathered together in person. Much as we have been truly blessed to have had access to worship online, there is, I think, a very real danger that our participation in such worship can be a little bit 'right hand clicking', or 'left eye watching'. The distractions at home are myriad. It is perfectly possible to have half of ourselves 'in', whilst the other half is very much 'out'. The very physicality of being gathered together in this place, the fact that we have chosen to make our way here, to this place, at this time, with this people, feels to me very much more akin to the 'whole self in', and of course our commitment to worship is very much aided by the presence of those others who have made the same journey, with the same purpose. As Psalm 133 reminds us - How beautiful it is for brothers to dwell together in unity!

And here we are, over half way through Lent. This season of stripping back, of pressing in, of allowing our selves to be fully immersed in the Scriptures and inviting God to illuminate our sins and our weaknesses. So forgive me for delving straight in, but this is a season of wrestling, just as Jesus did in the wilderness, with the really big and fundamental questions of our faith. I want to reflect this morning on the nature of our relationship with God through Jesus Christ. To reflect on the relationship between the grace of God, and our response in faith. To wrestle with the reality of the 'whole self in' both of Jesus Christ and indeed of ourselves. And the relationship between our hearts and our minds, and our bodies, as we retell week by week this narrative of redemption into which our own lives are being woven. What is it that God has done through Jesus Christ? How are we invited to respond? And what

difference does God's grace and our faith make – not just for ourselves, but for the world that we live in? These are big questions, but worthy of our attention, worthy of our intellectual wrestle – because we have a God who invites us to bring our 'whole selves in', and love Him with all our heart, mind, soul and strength.

We have in our readings today some particularly challenging verses, packed with dense theological imagery, and extraordinary drama. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul is at his most passionate as he describes the work of God in Christ to bring us from death, to life, from sin, to grace, from disobedience, to salvation. And he is at pains to emphasise how this transformation has been made possible by love – 'But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us EVEN WHEN we were dead through our trespasses'. There's a really tangible image of God's reaching down to us, of uniting us with Christ, and raising us up to the heavenly places. It's no wonder salvation is often referenced through the Bible as being like someone being rescued from a pit into which they have fallen and out of which they cannot escape.

In the narrative of salvation, God saves us in a wholly physical, bodily sense. His reaching down to us in Christ is 'whole self in'. Not a part of God comes to earth in Christ, not a part of Christ dies on the cross, Christ offers his whole entire self, as the means of grace. Paul concludes with the reminder that 'this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God'. It is not by anything that we do that we earn our salvation, and yet all that we do in response to God's grace, all the ways in which our lives are changed and transformed, all of these 'good works' are a fulfilment of the way that God has created us.

John helps us here too, to make sense of the relationship between grace and faith. In that extraordinary verse 16, we are reminded that 'God so loved the world that he gave his only son Jesus Christ, so that all who believe in him may not perish but may have eternal life'. You see now the interplay of grace and faith. God gives grace, and our response is faith. God gives himself, whole self, in the person of Jesus, and we are invited to commit not just our minds, but our souls, our bodies, our lives, our plans and purposes and hopes and fears and money and relationships, all that we are and all that we have. Believing has got to be whole self in. Only then do we allow ourselves fully to enter into this narrative of salvation, only then do we make this our story, our song.

It all sounds remarkably easy, doesn't it. But I don't know about you, I don't experience salvation as easy. Certainly, I can look back at my life and see

something of a before and after. I can pinpoint a moment where I came to understand something of what God has done in Christ, a moment where I sought to respond. I can remember praying a confession for the first time, and I can clearly see, looking back how God has redeemed me. And yet how many times do I come crawling back on my knees. Full of shame and guilt. For things I've done, or thought or said. Or not done or thought or said. For judgement and criticism of others, for self centredness and the desire to control my life. Etc etc. Sometimes it's so frustrating, and confusing. And hard. The way of discipleship feels very like the Hokey Cokey – we put our whole selves in, but then things happen, and somehow our whole selves fall out again, and then we come back and recommit ourselves in faith. The journey of faith is bumpy, and there will be seasons of challenge, of doubt, of fear, and of pain. But I think, as that beautiful hymn 'Love Divine' says, during this journey of faith we are changed from glory into glory, til in heaven we take our place, til we cast our crowns before thee, lost in wonder, awe and praise.

So do not be disheartened if you can't put your whole self in. If there are things in your life at the moment which are holding you back from responding to God's grace with your whole self, if there are practical, financial, health reason, intellectual reasons, or simply the fatigue of life. God's grace is sufficient. Whatever we offer of ourselves, God receives, and honours, and holds. And the point it this – that this narrative of salvation into which our lives are woven is ongoing! Where ever we are now in our faith journey, is not where we have been, or indeed where we will end up. I sometimes say the full stop on the story of our lives has not yet been placed. And so I invite you to journey with us this Easter especially. To be a pilgrim, to seek to understand, to receive, and to respond with whatever faith we have to the amazing grace of God. Amen.