

Pentecost 13 20th August 2020 'Setting our mind on divine things'

Matthew 16:21-28

Contemplatio: Rev'd Michael Wood

"Jesus turned to Peter and said, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things'"

The French American philosopher, Rene Girard, said that human beings are fundamentally imitative. We learn by copying. This is most evident in the way we learn language as infants – by imitating the language we hear around us. So I recall for example when one of our children, when she was a toddler, loudly dropped a particularly colourful swear word in the middle of Coles. Glancing around nervously I realised that she was imitating my language with great precision.

But more significantly than just imitating language, Girard observed that we humans imitate each other's *desires*. We learn what is desirable by copying others. In fact, it may be that I actually don't know what I desire until another person or group desires it first. In other words, DESIRE is highly contagious.

To give a couple of very simple examples of this. Consider the situation of two toddlers in a room and there is one red fire truck. The red fire truck is of no interest to either toddler. But what happens if one of the toddler's picks up the red fire truck? Yes, that toy suddenly becomes immensely interesting to the other toddler. We may even have a sudden outbreaking of hostilities. Just think of the tensions and even scuffles that break out at the front door of department stores when they open for the New Year's Day Sales.

Girard calls this phenomenon Mimetic (Imitative) **Desire**, which leads to Mimetic **Rivalry** and he proposes that it's this contagious rivalry which lies at the core of human culture and violence. Whenever we have two or more people imitating their desire for the same thing, we have conflict.

The interesting thing about mimetic rivalry is that the object of shared desire does not even have to be a physical object. The object of shared desire might be something far less tangible – like 'being right' for example. I might find myself, for example, feeling incredibly resentful towards another person. Suddenly at 2am I wake up thinking about this person and how annoying this other person is. I find myself fantasising about how to get even with that person or to get my own way.

Girard suggests that when mimetic rivalry gets constellated between two parties, that they start to unconsciously imitate each other in all kinds of ways. A small example is that I might go find an ally at the water cooler in my workplace and have a bitch session, "GOD I HATE JOHN – HE'S ONE OF THE MOST HATEFUL PEOPLE I'VE EVER MET". The same phenomenon can happen between countries. Look at the way that the USA and North Korea imitate each other in their military posturing.

Now some of us might be wondering where this is leading and what this has to do with the Gospel, so let's jump into today's reading.

"Jesus begins to show disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders, and chief priests, and scribes and be killed (and on the third day be raised). And Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke Jesus, saying, 'God forbid it Lord, this must never happen to you'".

What is Peter so wound up about here? On one level Peter has every right to be scared and indignant on Jesus's behalf. Jesus is predicting, quite insightfully, that when he gets to Jerusalem he's going to get lynched by the mob. Jesus, with all his popularity, will become the rival of the religious and political establishment. And the best way you get rid of a troublesome rival is to galvanise a crowd against the rival. The cross is, quite simply, an act of human mob violence or what is commonly known as 'Satanic scapegoating'

By any account it's entirely unjust and Peter has every right to be angry and anxious about this.

On the other hand, Peter also finds himself caught up in the mimetic anxiety of the mob. Peter might *think* he's a faithful follower of Jesus but when it comes to the crunch, when he is challenged, Peter goes along with the crowd and denies Jesus three times.

Peter loves the idea that Jesus is the Messiah but what he really wants is a successful Messiah – a Messiah who will kick the butts of the Romans and their Jewish conspirators in the House of Herod. Because if Jesus is this kind of successful Messiah, then Peter himself will also feel successful in this triumphant Jesus movement.

What Peter is doing here is trying to ENROL Jesus in his own desire. Peter is trying to get Jesus to imitate Peter.

And because Jesus seems to know that arrest and possible death could well be on the horizon, the temptation to get engaged in Peter's desire must be hugely tempting to Jesus.

This is what makes Jesus' response so powerful. Jesus says to Peter, "GET behind me Satan – you are a SCANDAL to me....you are a stumbling block to me"....you are being part of the problem here, not part of the solution.

This conversation between Jesus and Peter is potentially a crucial turning point in Jesus life where his entire ministry could have come unstuck. If Jesus had succumbed to imitating the desire of Peter...and temptation to become a successful Messiah instead of remaining faithful to God, we all wouldn't be sitting here today.

The triumph of the gospel at this point is that Jesus decides to imitate the desire of his ABBA – his Father, his Pappa rather than to imitate the desire of Peter for success.

This is not to say, of course, that it is the Abba's desire that Jesus die a brutal death. God does not conspire with our violence for any reason. As Isaac of Ninevah put it, 'all God can do is give his love'...and giving his love in this case meant following it all the way through and to absorb human hate rather than perpetuate it.

Whenever we gather around this table to receive the broken body of Christ, we collectively *reorient our desire* to the desire of God – the one who is not in rivalry with us but who is embodied mercy, forgiveness and compassion.