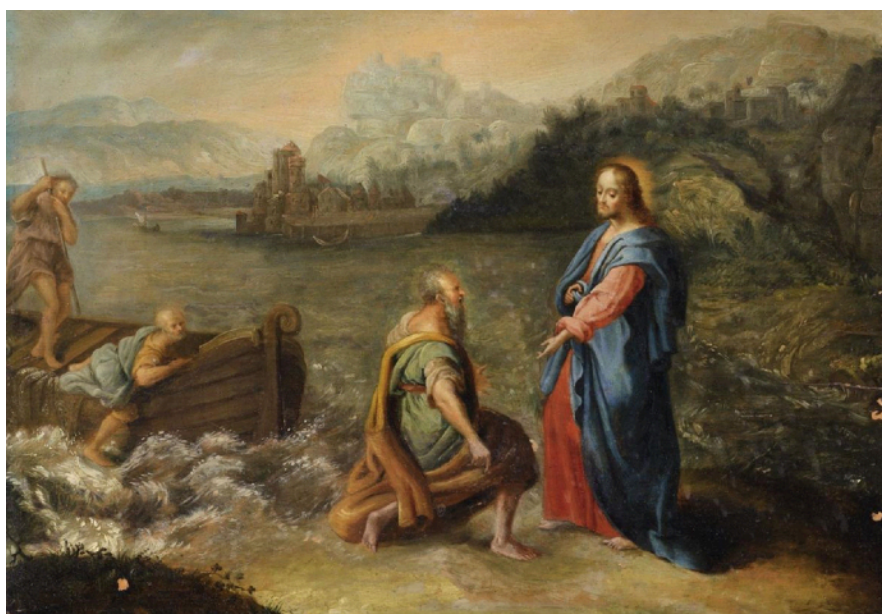

The Things of God

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 25 February 2024

Genesis 17:1-7,15-16 • Romans 4:13-25 • Mark 8:31-38



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

Jesus said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

As we get older, we find that the days seem to get shorter, and to pass by more quickly. Next week seems like a long way off, but then suddenly, it's here! I lose track of events. Things that happened a year ago seem like just a few months ago. I've been at this parish with you for over a year, but I feel as if I just started. And the events of the day compress into a shorter period, or so it seems. The things I do every day, like brushing my teeth, shaving, making the bed, taking out the rubbish — all those things that I do daily, or multiple times daily, seem to fill up the days. I feel like I'm always brushing my teeth! Or I pick up my razor to shave, and I think to myself, “Didn't I just do this?”

And I wonder why that is? Is it, perhaps, that I'm just not paying attention to all the other moments in between the tooth-brushing and shaving and bed-making? Because of course I am doing lots of other things — leading services, going to meetings, writing sermons, etc. We all have busy lives, and those daily activities, which seem to be always happening, likely take up less than 10% of our waking hours. It's just the sameness of them that makes them seem to fill up our days.

I was thinking of this because of what Jesus says to Peter in our Gospel passage today: "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." Certainly, brushing our teeth and showering and those sorts of things are human things, and I suppose we can't really do without them — not if we don't want to offend our fellow humans! But what, I wonder, are the human things that we want to avoid?

The first thing that came to mind is the Ten Commandments: murder, jealousy, stealing, profanity are all human things, and all are things we should avoid. God's people are not to do these things by express prohibition. By extension, other crimes, and other destructive emotions, such as anger and spite, are to be avoided. Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, expands on this:

Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. (Ephesians 4:29-32)

This is, incidentally, a text that we looked at in the Lenten studies this week. The key to it is in not grieving, that is, disappointing or making sad the Holy Spirit, and to be forgiving, as God forgives us. There is a relation between what we do on earth and what God does: we forgive others, because God forgives us. But to God are reserved some things: God may show righteous anger, but it is not the same for us. Anger between humans is almost always destructive. Righteousness is from God, and we should be careful to claim it for ourselves. So, we may set aside some earthly things, if not the showering and tooth-brushing, and we will be better for it.

Is this what Jesus meant in warning Peter? Peter was rebuking Jesus for talking about his, Jesus', own rejection and death. Peter was upset because he still had the idea that Jesus was going to be a victorious leader, driving out the Roman occupiers and restoring Israel to its former glory. Of course, that was not Jesus' plan at all. Jesus' plan, and his Father's plan, was to bring to humankind the chance of eternal life — definitely not an earthly thing. Jesus was trying to get

Peter to lift his vision above the powers and dominions of earth and consider the bigger picture of life with God. He goes on to talk about sacrifice. Peter must take up his cross if he wants to follow Jesus. That is a significant expression with several meanings, and one meaning is to leave aside the things of the world, such as our human comforts, our human relationships, and anything else which will distract us from serving God and letting God prepare us for eternal life. Our very souls are at stake, for “What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?” (Mark 8:36)

This requires more than sacrifice, more than giving up those sins which are enumerated in the Ten Commandments, or mentioned in the Ephesians passage. It means taking on the things of God, as far as it is in our power. It means a robust prayer life. It means strengthening our faith. It means knowing God’s word as revealed in the Bible. All these things are the gifts of God to us, which we must choose to accept and truly make our own. Focussing on these things changes our perspective on life. It changes how we view the world around us. It does not make us hate the world or those in it; it makes us love them more, as God’s good creation. A regular practice of prayer and Bible reading helps us understand the world. God created us to live in this world and to enjoy what it has to offer, as long as we understand that this is just the first part of our life with God. So be thankful for what God has given us here and now, but keep your mind on God’s love and the eternal life to come. Give thanks to God who keeps us in his care, here on earth and hereafter. Amen.