

The logic of love Stephen Best

May our hearts may be opened to God's word even as we ask that God's word may be opened to our hearts

As you probably realise, I am not so much interested in Mr Spock's ears as in Mr Spock's heart. His captain: Captain Kirk on the human starship he serves values Spock's computer-like mind, impeccable judgment and logical counsel but time and time again adds to it his own creative emotional spontaneity to win through the day. Captain Kirk is at times irrational, emotional, seizing the moment acting with his gut feelings and it shows up the limits of logic in the face of the human condition.

Mr Spock's heart interests me because, in an adventure in the Alpha Seti region of space he dies in a dramatic act of self sacrifice. The ship's engines are down there is about to be an explosion close by and the only way to save the crew and ship is for him to enter the engine chamber, fix the problem, but in doing so he knows he will expose himself to a fatal dose of radiation. And he does it. And as he dies, and his captain asks why, Spock says "The needs of the many, outweigh the needs of the one." It is logical. And he dies.

But as in all great stories, it doesn't end there. And in the next film his crewmates are engaged in a seemingly madcap, impossible adventure to grasp at one last hope to bring their friend and crewmate back to life, for Spock's body has been cast into an explosion caused, by the curiously named Genesis project, which is about creating life. His crewmates give up everything that has been important to them, they lose everything, they do everything which is illogical and irrational, they ruin their careers, their reputations, blow up a starship, the Captain's own son dies in the process, they clutch blindly at that one last straw, just to bring Spock back to life. And they succeed. And when Spock, understanding the trail of sacrifice and loss which has been caused by the effort asks why, his captain says "Because the needs of the one outweigh the needs of the many."

For Spock it is a lesson, not in the logic of reason, but the logic of love.

Jesus often spoke in parables, stories which were set in his own time, to get across his message. We seem often, these days, to need to speak in parables of a different nature. Good science fiction (special effects aside), has a broad appeal partly, I think, because it takes these eternal values, like those we see in the parables and puts them in a different context, but one to which people somehow more easily relate. After all,

why should eternal truths be any different in the first century to the 24th century.

And as I reflected upon this story of Captain Kirk and his search for Spock, to bring him back to life I saw many things which touched on my reading of the bible; a commitment (or a covenant if you like) which requires sacrifice, risk and endeavour. Loss. Death. New life. Through an act of love. And I recalled the parable of the lost sheep; the shepherd of 100 sheep, not content with having the 99 and leaving them to go and seek out the missing one and rejoicing at finding it, the woman who lights a lamp and turns her house upside down to find the one missing coin of ten and at the reunion of Spock and Kirk, the rejoicing and the turning of the saying “the needs of the one, outweigh the needs of the many” I thought of the rejoicing of the father, slaughtering the fatted calf on the return of the prodigal son. Love does this in the first century and, says the writer, also in the 24th century

A bit fanciful, you might think, to transplant the parables of Jesus to a starship! The reality is that today, more people will know the tale of “The Search for Spock” than will know the parable of the lost coin or the lost sheep or the prodigal son. The truth, you see, to mis-quote another science fiction series, is “out there”, but wears different clothes. We who are used to seeing the truth “in here” are reasonably comfortable with the images we have used for millennia and the way we see it. A worshipping congregation relates more readily to shepherds than starships. Outside this building it is the other way around. The theologian Jim Cotter says much of what we rely upon in church does not connect with today’s heart or mind. Living words lose their power to transform when they become clichés. The challenge, for the church’s mission today, is to recognise how and where people now more easily see the truth, and, holding the link with tradition, square the circle.

This is much of what I see in our lectionary reading this morning from Acts. I feel very sorry for Peter. Nothing stays still for him. He is inspired by the love, teachings and example of this carpenter whom he then denies and abandons. This same Peter then has to work beyond his guilt and shortcomings as he fulfils his destiny by witnessing to and establishing the church of the carpenter resurrected. The church, don’t forget, is at this time found uniquely within the confines of the Jewish tradition. And we come to this passage where the Gentiles, the outsiders, those outside the church – “out there” – are seen by those “in there” to be filled with the holy spirit.

The sayings of Jesus we teased out in family time earlier this morning – going the extra mile, turning the other cheek, loving your enemies, can be found in Matthew’s gospel and you may recall that they are phrased

in a way disparaging to the Gentiles. “For if you love those who love you what reward do you have? If you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?”

What is Peter to do? These Gentiles are filled with the holy spirit. Logic dictates that this is an illogical situation. Peter is rooted in the Jewish tradition. God, for him is the heartbeat, the essence of the Jewish tradition. God made a covenant with his chosen people – and now, to the amazement of God’s “chosen” people, God’s spirit is manifest, evident, alive and at work elsewhere: beyond the confines of Old Testament tradition, old testament edicts, beyond everything Peter has been brought up to believe.

How is Peter to respond? With his head; “this makes no sense: God is the God of the Jews.” or with his heart “God, what new thing are you doing here?”. He follows the carpenter who broke taboos, who healed on the Sabbath, spoke with the woman at the well, and Peter opens the church to the Gentiles. It is not logical. But he sees beyond limited human logic. He sees with his heart. He orders the baptism of the Gentiles. Where will this open and affirming act lead? We who look back on this act millennia later know there will be rows over circumcision, letters by later apostles seeking to hold the body of the early church to an understanding which takes it beyond tradition and into the outside world. We, as Gentiles, owe our place in the wider vision of God’s church to these acts of risk, endeavour and trust.

This is the logic of love which is at the core – since God is at our very core - of what it means to be truly human as we each seek to do God’s work. And what of our role as City Church. I wonder where now “out there” do we see God’s spirit at work, in illogical defiance of taboo and tradition “in here”? What new thing is God calling us to embrace as we continue to shoulder the mantle of Peter and the early church? What do we need to leave behind, to reach to “out there”, what do we need to risk, what loss, death and resurrection do we need to embrace as the continuation of this work which God has entrusted to us, what part do we continue to play; for the goal surely is a time when there is no longer an “in here” and an “out there”. At that point – and at that point only I think is there a chance that lion will lie down with lamb and weapons will be turned to ploughs and Mr Spock himself, might raise his eyebrow and say, in admiration: “Illogical, but fascinating and very, most perfectly human.”