

The Rev. Dr. David K. McIntosh  
October 10, 2021- 20<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost (Proper 23-2B)  
Given at St. Mark's Church, Bridgewater, CT

Amos 5: 6-7, 10-15; Psalm 90: 12-17; **Hebrews 4.12-16; Mark 10.17-31**

**“The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword,  
piercing until it divides soul from spirit...”**  
**“Many who are first will be last, and the last will be  
first.” †**

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Sometimes when I hear the famous epigrams of the Bible, I feel uneasy. I mean the type of statements like the two we heard today (above). There is something that makes me feel uncomfortable, and that's okay, it's what they're meant to do. They're meant to make a point by using shocking and seemingly conflicting statements.

I normally wouldn't think of God as cutting me up and separating my bones and joints, like a butcher. Hardly a pleasant image. I prayed over these scriptures last week and wondered whether that metaphor of a 'two-edged sword,' something meant to cut and divide, was a true reflection of the Word of God. It sounds harsh, violent. Perhaps God's word is more like a surgeon's scalpel, used to open the body up to reveal disease. Maybe God opens the human heart in order to assess and fix problems within.

Paul says the Word of God penetrates us, like a knife. It cuts away the surface, pulling away those things that are superficial; removing the masks we all wear, in order to reveal who we really are underneath. It's helpful to understand the Greek that St Paul uses here—*psuche*' (soul) and *pneuma* (spirit).

*Psuche*' is the self, the essence of life, our physical nature and being, while *pneuma* is our inner spirit. He speaks of God sifting through the desires and intentions of our hearts, evaluating our emotional desires as well as our intellectual thoughts and intentions. Once our soul and spirit are laid out before him, our emotional and intellectual lives become subject to the scrutiny and judgment of God.

We all, at some point in our lives, portray ourselves in ways that might not be honest. We all behave in ways, or dress in ways, to impress and to fit into society or to make others like us. Sometimes we pretend to be someone we're not. St. Paul is clear, we can't do this with God, for God sees inside each of us, into the innermost secrets of our hearts. Nothing can be hidden from God! And that's overwhelming, and a little scary. We're told that we will be judged. That's what the young man in today's Gospel story is so worried about. Yet, Paul goes on to tell us good news— as Christians, we know that we have a God that *sympathizes* with us! God became flesh. God was born as a human being, lived as one of us, and knows what it's like to be human. God can sympathize with us; that's a major change in theology! God is not the distant/ different God of the Jewish Hebrew Scriptures, nor is God like the Greeks described— the unfeeling God of the Stoics or the detached God of the Epicureans. OUR GOD *knows each of us*, inside and out, and sympathizes with our struggles and hardships. God came as one of us, 'dwelt (in the Greek, 'pitched a tent')

among us.' Jesus showed us how to be faithful children of God and how to live as good human beings!

As we heard today in the Gospel about the rich young man, it's more about *being*, than *doing*. It's about who we are inside, not what we appear to be from the outside. Jesus disappoints that young man, who is bent on following the rules, obeying the commandments, and fulfilling the letter of the Law— dotting the I's and crossing the T's in order to gain a reward. Jesus stops him abruptly, 'stop flattering me and stop flattering yourself! Only God is good! Think and reflect on who you are, who God created you to be, and then you'll see what you must do.'

'The first will be last, and the last will be first,' this is clearly a warning against human pride. It's also a warning against pursuing man-made goals or following our personal intentions, rather than God's! It's not about being rich or being poor, material possessions are not the problem, it's *what they can do to us* that is the real issue. If material possessions become not merely tools in our lives, but the goal of life... if our possessions direct our hearts and intentions toward society's goals rather than God's, then that's a problem! Jesus told the young man (and all of us) that having possessions is not the issue, they simply test one's character. The real question is: Do we use what we have been given responsibly? How do our 'things' shape us? Do we use them to look good, or do we use them for the good of all?

Remember, the world looks at outward appearance, but God looks into our hearts! It's not about who people think I am, it's not about fulfilling the Law, it's not about checking all the right boxes, it's about becoming the person God has called me to be. It's about *being*, not *doing*. It's about living in the spirit of God, with humility and love.

Who is it God has called me to be?  
 How does that affect what I do?  
 Am I following God's will in my life?  
 Am I pursuing God's mission, or the world's?  
 Am I pursuing God's mission, or my own?

I invite all of us to reflect on these questions, throughout the week. As we learned in the Scriptures today, the word of God penetrates deep within and calls each of in a unique way. Who is it God has called you to be? Will you be the first, or the last?

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