

5 Epiphany – 7 February 2010 – The Rev. Dr. Guy J.D. Collins

May I speak in the name of God, Giver, Forgiver and Lover. Amen.

If you think that Marcion is the name given to someone who lives on the planet Mars think again. Marcion spelt with a 'c' is, in fact, the name of one of our earliest rogue theologians. And while Marcion got into trouble some eighteen hundred years ago, his views remain profoundly relevant to us today. Marcion was excommunicated as a heretic for the simple, and quite understandable belief, that there was much in the Old Testament that seemed to be not very nice, or at least sub-Christian. And anyone listening properly to the portion that we heard from Isaiah this morning would probably want to agree with him. After all, what kind of God burns coals of incense in the mouth of his prophet? And what kind of God threatens devastation? And this is before we even get into other really meaty passages which are full of quite impressive divine instructions about how to beat one's enemies into pulp.

Suffice it to say Marcion was not enthusiastic about the portrait of God in the Old Testament. As a result Marcion wanted to insist that the Christian God, the God of the New Testament, could not possibly be the same as the God of the Old Testament. In a quite logical way, Marcion therefore argued that Christians should segregate and separate themselves from the Hebrew scriptures.

To give Marcion credit, he was absolutely right about one thing. The portrayal of God or Yahweh in portions of the Hebrew scriptures is not always of a cozy, comforting, solace-giving God. God is also angry, vituperative, vengeful, and, frequently threatening terrible consequences to those who ignore him. And I suspect that most people in the Upper Valley reading their Hebrew Scriptures would share Marcion's hesitation about identifying some of the pictures of Yahweh with the picture of the God of Jesus. Where one is belligerent and bellicose the other is peaceful and passive.

Yet the early church in its great wisdom chose not to endorse the views of Marcion. Instead, in an apparent contradiction of all common sense the early church chose to retain the scriptural status of the Hebrew Scriptures.

In case you are thinking this is all very abstract and unrelated to everyday life you might want to think again. The treatment of Marcion reminds us that the church is decisively committed to respecting and honoring the whole of God's story, and not just a few sanitized and edited highlights. By rejecting Marcion the church was not so much snubbing a bright and upcoming thinker so much as taking a stand of faith and loyalty with the writers of the Hebrew scriptures.

In many ways it would have been easy to side with Marcion and separate Old and New Testaments. It would certainly be more logical. But the church did the difficult thing. It decided to stand with both. And it decided not to play into the hands of those who see the world in simplistic terms of good and evil.

One reason we need to remember Marcion is that if we are to be Christians, and that must always be a question, we need to refrain from splitting the world into simple categories of good and evil. In affirming the sacred nature of the Hebrew Scriptures the church forced itself to do serious thinking about how a divinely inspired text could at the same time contain some seriously un-divine things.

Clearly the only reason we have a church today is for exactly the same reason. Alone, like Marcion, each of us can decide what we think is right or wrong. But together in community with others, in church, deciding on the fundamentals becomes much more complex. I believe that God likes that complexity. And I really do think that the heresy of Marcion is ultimately one of the greatest threats to our world. For at rock bottom the Marcionite heresy is really the simplistic view that one person on their own knows good

from evil. Or to put it more colloquially, the road to hell is paved with good intentions.

Perhaps the most pertinent example of Marcion's legacy today was the news of the missionaries who attempted to remove dozens of children from Haiti. It may well be that the church group was sincere in their hope to improve the lives of those children. But at best their actions displayed arrogance, stupidity, reckless disregard for the law, colossal naiveté, and sheer thoughtlessness. At worst it was taking advantage of the misfortune of others that was simultaneously imperialist, racist, and criminal. And as the incendiary comments of Pat Robertson also remind us, some people of faith have much to answer for in their response to Haiti.

We all know how tempting it is to do or say something in the face of inexplicable and awful events just for the sake of making ourselves feel better. But knee jerk, simplistic and wrong-headed reactions like Robertson and the missionaries fail to understand the complexity of Haiti. They also fail to realize that the wider world bears a large burden of responsibility for having helped create terribly difficult conditions in Haiti. Sadly it is not solely the criminally dangerous who are guilty of acting without thought; it is also kind and gentle people who want only the good of others. What Marcion teaches us all, if we are ready to learn, is that sometimes we have to stand in a place of awkwardness and uncertainty. And sometimes, however good it may make us feel, we cannot claim ignorance as an excuse not to deal with complexity of the world.

When Jesus filled the nets of the disciples and saved their boats from sinking he did so to undercut the power of fear. And he did it in such a way as to remind all of us that as social beings our social structures are often the ones that create bonds of fear. It was entirely natural for the disciples to be alarmed, and we do well to remember that. In the same way, it is entirely natural for our community to be concerned and alarmed about the prospect of significant budget cuts at the College. In the face of that fear it is

understandable to want to argue against those who are operating the levers of power. Equally, while our legitimate fears cannot be simply brushed away, nor can they be allowed to dominate.

In some ways Marcion is like those television preachers who teach the power of old fashioned positive thinking. Both teach that we should exclude anything that is challenging or threatens our nice cozy view of the world. That is not what I am suggesting. In the face of challenge we have to first understand the challenge before we can respond. The problem with Marcion was that he preferred just to side step the challenge raised by the Hebrew scriptures rather than stopping to examine just how a good God could be reconciled with the strange stories about Yahweh.

Today as we prepare ourselves for a difficult week in the life of the College and wider community, I urge you to learn from the Jesus filled the nets of the disciples, and not the Marcion who attempted to ban the Old Testament. Be concerned, yes. But be not afraid. Strange as it might sound, and it is strange, the Christian response to our times must include hope and confidence that all will turn to the good. And this is not a hope or confidence born from ignoring reality. Rather the Christian hope and confidence is born from one who suffered the oppression of the world squarely on. Christ suffered for us so that we should no longer suffer. As we face life's complexity may we reject both simplistic optimism and fearful anxiety as hollow illusions. Instead of taking the road well traveled we need to take the lead from one of Dartmouth's more famous alumni, and follow the road less traveled. It is a path that will not please the simplifying powers that rule the world, but it will direct us into the heart of the sustaining power that is God's love. Amen.