

Lent is our opportunity to face up to the values we have carried in our assumptions. We recently read about, and some of us even saw images of terrorism in New Zealand. Such actions originate from manifestations of Islamophobia that grow out of an assumption that some people are less than or more dangerous than others. Such assumptions are usually writ large or hide covertly in narratives even in holy scripture. It was not lost on us that we had a reading from Genesis chapter 15 on Sunday where we read about Abram being told by God that Eliezer, who was a slave, was not going to be his legitimate heir. "...No one but your issue shall be your heir," was how the word of the Lord came to him. Later on, in that story, Ishmael, whom Hagar and Abram had, was not to be his legitimate heir either. Hagar was an Egyptian slave of Abram's wife Sarai, who dealt harshly with her when she was pregnant. Hagar eventually ran away and had her child Ishmael, alone in the wilderness. Well, from these stories, it seems to me that we can make God in our image.

Our prejudices, our cultural preferences, and even our racism can find justification in the voice of God through a cosmic lip-sync, where we puppet God to say something we would say! Juxtapose Genesis 15 with Galatians 3:28 "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus!" Can a God who comes across as racist in the Abram story become reconciling a few centuries later? Could it be that we have been assigning the voice of the dominant culture to the word of God? The work of God in Jesus of the Gospels was radical because Jesus taught us to evolve into our true Beloved-self as the Baptized. This Good News is counter-cultural!

For centuries we fought spiritual and real wars based on the assumption that some are inferior to others and hence had to be shunned, ignored, made invisible, eliminated or controlled. While such a mindset does not always lead to nationalism and in some extreme situations to Fascism, it normalizes the assumption. It justified operating out of a place of fear. Human proclivity is to take comfort in the assumption that someone is less than me. The whole caste system in an ancient civilization like India functions on such a premise.

A similar assumption has sustained racism, sexism, homophobia, more over centuries. Following the teachings of Jesus to pursue holiness is to choose to be "different" by not succumbing to the same assumptions of the dominant culture. Christians will always be unpopular, not by choice, but because of this baseline of questioning wrong cultural assumptions. You and I are called to be truthful not because it is popular, but because it is the way of the cross. Interestingly, as it was with Jesus, it is also the way of resurrection hope; a way of being unencumbered in this life and the next. In that sense, ours will always be a minority position.

Lent calls us to question our assumptions profoundly and see how we can change our mindset and behavior on things that matter. Giving up chocolates and other treats can be a path, but let's keep digging to unearth the assumptions behind what we are seeking to engage in our souls!

Have a Holy Lent!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'A. L. B.', with a long, sweeping underline.

