

SchooLink Vol 6:4 November 2000

The Danger of 'Worm Theology'

There's nothing wrong with worms! In the garden they are very beneficial and an important part of God's good creation. Worms have their special role in God's scheme of things which only they can fulfill.

From a totally different perspective, I appreciate the profound depth of the worm imagery in Psalm 22 when the suffering servant of God complains to God (v 6):

*But I am a worm, and not human;
Scorned by others, and despised by people.*

Mocked by those around him, and feeling rejected even by God, the suffering servant feels no sense of worth or value in his own eyes, or in the estimation of others.

However, I begin to feel a little uneasy with the first verse of the passion hymn (ALH 61):

*Alas! and did my Saviour bleed,
And did my sovereign die?
Would He devote that sacred head
For such a worm as I?*

I recognise that the hymn is stressing a very important thing about me and all other human beings – the fact of sin in our lives (cf Job 25:6). And this is critical in our understanding of the human condition because in the face of secular humanism, the teaching of original sin is very unpopular. Even in the church, there can often be the playing down of the effect of sin in our lives. Human beings are seen as inherently good, essentially able to do what is right even though they may not choose to do it. It is an approach which tries to replace God by the human self, and in this view of the world, education is often seen as the cure for social ills through helping the individual to achieve fuller self expression.

A biblically based anthropology must take seriously the radical separation between God and the individual which recognises that because of sin, we have nothing which we can do to make ourselves right with God. By nature we are totally cut off from God by our sin and this break between God and us effects all other relationships as well – between the individual and self, between the individual and others, and between the individual and the environment.

But in spite of my sins, I am not worthless! I am the person whom God created, the one for whom Jesus Christ died, and the one in whom the Holy Spirit lives and works. There can be the danger that by concentrating so much on my state of sin, and on the holiness of God, we forget that the psalm also says (Psalm 8:4,5):

*What are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?
Yet you have made them a little lower than God,
And crowned them with glory and honor.*

In our Lutheran theology we emphasise strongly the second article of the creed and the centrality of the teaching of justification, and this is vital for our understanding of our relationship with God. However, as a result of this emphasis, we can tend to push the first article of the creed with its teaching of God as creator into the background.

Even after sin radically corrupted God's good creation, God is still the creator. We are still part of God's ongoing creation. God hasn't taken a vacation in heaven and left his creation to take care of itself. God continues his creative work. We are both creations of God and sinners at the same time. It's crucial to maintain the balance between those two perspectives.

As Luther reminds us in his explanation of the first article in the catechisms, God has made each one of us, and has given to each one of us individual and unique gifts and abilities. No two human beings are the same – no one else can fulfil the role for which God has created me. Even though I may feel at times that others are so much more gifted than I am, yet God has a place for each one of us. As Luther put it so vividly (LW 46: 231): 'For a good building we need not only hewn facings but also backing stones'.

We have to be on our guard against a false humility – playing down the gifts God has given to us. Even though for all kinds of reasons I may feel inadequate or less 'valuable' than another person whom God has created, God has gifted me! Rather than spending my energy in negative comparisons with other people and complaints against God because he has not created me like some other person, I can celebrate how God has created me and what he has given to me and I can recognise and accept the importance of making the best use possible of God's gifts to me.

This is a striving for 'excellence' which can be consistent with theology of the cross – that theological perspective which allows us to see how God works in a hidden way, often in just the very opposite way from the one that we would have anticipated. God comes not in the great and powerful, but in the weak and simple: his greatest power is shown at the point of his greatest weakness – in his death on the cross.

Why do we strive for the best of which we are capable? The crucial aspect here is our motivation. This is not for our own benefit and glory - and especially not so that we can get ahead at the expense of others. Our motivation is to serve God by serving in love those whom God has placed into our sphere of interaction – to serve the world and to serve the church. In this way we can let our 'lights shine before others, so that they may see [our] good works and give glory to [our] Father in heaven' (Matthew 5:16). This is excellence for the sake of service.

A false 'worm theology' can also make a virtue of mediocrity. Why should we imagine that we can offer to God anything less than the best we can do? To do so is to throw God's gifts to us back into God's face. Why is it that we often find it so difficult to thank God for what he gives us and to show that response of thanksgiving in using as fully as possible, for the benefit of others, all that God has given to us? This approach to 'worm theology' has also sometimes allowed a tendency to anti-professionalism in the church – a tendency not to demand the best professionally from people for what is sometimes termed 'pastoral reasons' or because somehow it is seen as inappropriate to demand 'the best' from people. Issues which should have been addressed for the benefit of all, have simply been allowed to slide past, and sometimes the whole community suffers because the necessary steps have not been taken to deal with an issue quickly and in a decisive manner.

But on the other hand, we have to guard against a striving for 'excellence' which sees us in competition with others – which tries to evaluate one person against another. We are all 'gifted and talented', each one of us in his or her own way. That is a challenge for our Lutheran schools – to help each person experience that and find a way to express it.

A proper understanding of our place in God's creation also recognises the enormous honor, privilege and power God has given to each one of us to participate with him in his continuing creative activity. Through procreation, we contribute to the continuity of the human race and in developing the gifts and potential of the next generation; through our participation in the life of our community and through our vocation we each seek to play our part in God's plans for his creation as the Holy Spirit works in us and through us; through the arts and culture, our own creativity mirrors, if only in a very imperfect way, the creativity of God in the creation of the world.

What is our response to all this? Surely it must be more than focussing on our unworthiness in the sight of God – an over-developed ‘worm theology’! God has dealt with our sin through becoming a human being and experiencing for our sakes the humiliation of which Psalm 22 speaks. Recognising our new status as saints in the eyes of God, we can celebrate our uniqueness, our giftedness, our place in God’s on-going creative activity, being the people God created us to be. We can live with the response to God which Luther suggested in his explanation to the first article of the creed: ‘Therefore I surely ought to thank and praise, serve and obey him.’

Dr Malcolm Bartsch
Dean
Luther Seminary
North Adelaide SA