

WHICH SIDE OF THE BRAIN DO YOU USE?

Genesis 1. 1 – 2. 3

Romans 8. 18-25

Matthew 6. 25-34

I speak to you in the name of  the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Do you tend to be right-brained or left-brained in your approach to life? Scientists, and particularly neuroscientists, tell us about the relationship between the two sides of the brain and how they affect the world and the cultures in which we live.

They tell us that the right-hand side of the brain, which controls the left side of the body, looks at the whole picture. It sees things in context; it looks at meaning and value; it understands metaphors and poetry; it looks and listens.

The left-hand side of the brain, on the other hand, controls the right side of the body and looks at things *in their parts* rather than as systems in relationship. It works out rules and principles and theories; it classifies and makes boundaries; it's the focus for much of our use of language; and it's concerned with grasping and using the world for our benefit.

Both sides of the brain have something to offer. To give a very simple example, a bird will use its left brain and right eye to concentrate on the detailed task of picking up seeds and feeding itself, whilst its right brain and left eye are looking out for rivals, mates and dangers from predators. The big picture, and the detail: birds need both, and so do we.

Some neuroscientists have been saying that Western society has become too left-brained. Our stress on science and technology has enabled us to dominate and manipulate the world, but at the cost of losing the wider context of the non-human

world and our relationships with it. So for example, in dealing with a contemporary question such as climate change and the environment (and our recent storms certainly highlight the urgency of the issue), a left-brained approach will be to find an answer to this problem, using scientific evidence, proof texts, analysis and theories, and the left brain will judge any solutions on the basis of how useful and effective they are for *me*.

Whereas a more right-brained approach will be concerned with relationships, stories, inter-connections between people and with our world, and how what we do about climate change will serve our ultimate values and be for the good of the whole.

The passage that we had read from chapter 8 of St Paul's letter to the Romans comes from that part of the book where Paul is reflecting on the human dilemma about sin: that we want to do the right and the good thing, but we find ourselves doing the wrong thing, often without even being aware of it.¹

Paul speaks of how the solution to our struggle with sin isn't found through deciding to do better, but through being in relationship with God in Jesus Christ: sharing the sufferings of our Lord and his resurrection from the dead, so that we might live with his life.²

And he then goes on in the passage to relate these sufferings to the way in which the whole created world is chafing with frustration against its bondage to decay, groaning as if in labour. He draws the parallel between the world's agonies and the groans of Christian believers as we await our ultimate salvation.

Paul moves from left-brained thinking, which says 'here's a problem of sin to solve' – to right-brained thinking, which recognises that our problem is part of a much

¹ Cf. Rom 7. 15-25.

² Cf. Rom 8. 2-6, 11.

wider context, and God's work with us is only a part of what God is doing in creation. Our left-brained experience of the world leads us to focus only on ourselves, whereas our right-brained thinking helps us to see that God's work in Jesus Christ is done for the whole world.

The implication of what Paul says is that Christians *should* be groaning at the state of the world, because we see such a huge incongruity between our desire and our experience. We long to know God; we desire to see him and his justice in our human world. Yet we experience sin and weakness and frustration, and we see so much suffering around us, so many issues and loose ends and broken lives.

But our response to this conflict between our true desire and awful experience, says Paul, shouldn't be to rush in and fix the problem; but to begin by waiting and *hoping in God*: to listen, to grow, to be changed so that we can help change the world.

And our gospel reading, taken from Matthew 6, is even more clearly right-brained in what our Lord has to say about worrying about tomorrow. Lots of people spend lots of time worrying about what tomorrow will bring, and many of them with good reason.

When Jesus speaks about not worrying about food and clothing, he is not saying that these things don't matter. But he is urging us to look beyond the immediate problem to the wider context. And that wider context is that that our needs are much simpler than we might prefer to think; and that we have a God who is capable of taking care of his creation. We are invited to have a trusting relationship with God, and live our lives accordingly. The punch-line of not worrying is Christ's call to 'strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.'

If we think about it for a moment, our Lord's call is not for the poor simply to have faith, with the promise that everything will then be all right. Rather, it's a call to *all of us*, especially those of us who have more money, power and influence, to stop living in a left-brained 'let's solve this particular problem for our own benefit' way, and instead to live our lives in relationship with God and his world, including caring for the people that it contains.

If everyone lived in accordance with God's righteousness, then there'd be no need for food banks, because we'd share what we have with others. In a more right-brained world, our relationships with one another and with the natural world would have a higher priority than they currently do. But those of us who are more left-brained close our eyes to the righteous demands of love that God and our neighbours make upon us.

Years ago, a business colleague of mine took a trip to India and was profoundly shocked by the poverty and suffering that she saw there. After she returned from her visit I overheard her saying to another colleague, 'I can't cope with thinking about that place ever again.' Now that's a good left-brained statement for you: it's as if my colleague had said, 'India doesn't fit into my world-view, so it doesn't really exist.' What a good thing it is that God doesn't say that *about us*; that God looks to the good of the whole and sees us as a creation to be loved rather than a problem to be solved.

If our eyes are closed to pain, suffering and injustice, then our minds are closed to the hope that God gives us in Jesus Christ. So let us read the newspapers; let us hear the uncomfortable news; let us sigh and groan over the state of the world, with both sides of our brain. And let us seek God's kingdom and righteousness together, and look with hope for that day when the whole of creation, including us, will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

Amen.