

Epiphany VI Year A

“Before each person are life and death, and whichever one chooses will be given”

I am still on my quest to take on the explanation of the churchy words we use from day to day, and hopefully enable them to make some sense and have some relevance for our post modern spiritual lives....It is a quest to help them make some sense beyond a superstition or platitude. Unfortunately these churchy words have been overused and abused until they have become vacant and ossified; and in some cases, being co-opted by pop-Christian culture, they even have become absurd and irrelevant. A couple of examples of such words are *sin*, which according to the context of scripture, is much less about the sins of the individual and much more about sin as an insidious structural reality that pervades society as a whole... and then there's the word *heaven*, which according to scripture is not at all about life in the hereafter, but about living the ways of God in earth... heaven for our church ancestors is a present reality of beauty and wellbeing. Now, just such an awareness concerning these two words can make quite a difference in how we read scripture with integrity... and by integrity I mean that we are able to own it as true so that we may live a life of faith wholeheartedly and without apology. We'll talk about those words on another occasion, but today I want to talk about another such churchy word and that is the word *salvation*.

First of all, Salvation according to scripture is not a personal reality, but a coming future event. Paul's letters, the earliest Christian literature we have, refers to salvation as the coming of God's reign in earth....It is the impending transformation of a world subject to sin and the fear of death, into a world in which justice, mercy, and well being exist for all. Salvation has nothing to do with the individual only. Salvation instead is about the transformation of society as a whole.

In our western so-called Christian culture salvation is all about the individual... We are all familiar with the phrase “Jesus is my personal savior,” and the notion that believing in this personal savior is the means to get to heaven. Salvation then in our culture is something we possess as our own, guaranteeing a blissful life after death... But that is not what the writers of the gospels have in mind... nor Paul, nor the scribes of Hebrew scripture... Salvation in Jewish scripture, including the New Testament (which has its roots and theology in Judaism) is about a revolutionary new world order.... A new world order, no less... a new world order: social, economic, political and spiritual... a complete and radical transformation

into the vision God has for the world, and the rightful place of humankind in it. Salvation is a way of life that will recreate the universe entire... a new social order in which there are no outcasts, only egalitarian community... a new economic order in which all share equally the wealth that is God's gift to all people; in which all share in the abundance of creation... a new political order that engenders a society that is just and at peace... a spiritual order in which all live in the knowledge of intimate connection to each other, in which all become brothers and sisters of truth.... In which all participate in the very mind of God.

Salvation is a way of life upon which we are always on the cusp. It dwells between the now and the not yet... It is a future event coming as we speak... and yet we see signs of its coming everywhere... setting its roots from the future into the present day... Ours is not to own, possess salvation, but to be about the business of salvation, to bear it, to bring it, and to give it away ... It is for us to choose to live for this coming kingdom (always a choice), and in so living, the kingdom, God's gracious commonweal, is brought to fruition,... Ours is to live in that in between place, choosing the good and the true for the greater good of our world... each and every day... We are to make the choice each and every day,... We are to choose life and not death, as the writer of Ecclesiasticus puts it... In choosing life for our world, to choose to be midwives of the new world order, is to choose salvation. It is for us each and every day to choose life, not death... and dear brothers and sisters of the commonweal, life is the harder choice, the choice of salvation, the road less travelled.... So with that little excursus on salvation, let's look at today's reading from the Gospel of Matthew.

This reading is one part of the sermon on the mount... and the entire sermon, which is really a teaching, is all about how to make the choice for salvation... how to make the choice of living for God... the choice for life... which is living for a world made right, a world made peaceful, a world made just.... living for life and not death. In fact the entire purpose of Torah, the Hebrew bible, the so-called law, to which the prophets attest... the purpose of Torah is to instruct and convict a people to live for God's kingdom in earth... to choose to live a way that is life giving... a way of life which is good for the whole... So in this so-called sermon Jesus is interpreting Torah for his own time... not changing it, but interpreting it...breathing new life into words once etched in stone since time immemorial.

Here Jesus has taken familiar material for any Jewish audience and offers his take on the Law... this is Ten Commandment stuff...do no murder... do not commit adultery... do not take the Lord's name lightly (or

if you prefer, in vain)... These are laws well known among Jews and non controversial to be sure.... But Jesus cuts to the radical intent of the law... that is the law being not the end, but the law being the means of God's kingdom... In other words... following the law just isn't good enough... the law for Matthew, in the words of Jesus, is an outward and visible sign of a predisposition of choosing life... a predisposition of choosing salvation... Ironically, if one takes a literalist view of the law one might miss the underlying ethos of the Law... One can, as it were, cover under the law all manner of moral failing... If it is legal, like divorce, then it must be okay, right... Look at our own laws... Our racist constitution in our state... laws that disenfranchise the poor... Citizens united in our nation, a law that gives Corporations more influence over the electoral process than anyone has ever imagined... all legal... but moral?

No, Jesus here is talking about a predisposition that underlies the law, that supersedes the law, a predisposition that will empower the genius of the law and its continued relevance... a predisposition of choosing life, not death, the whole purpose of the law in the first place.

How shall we then, dear friends of God... How shall we choose life; how shall we choose salvation; how do we bring heaven on earth, how do we become the field of God, how do we become the building of God... Well, there is instruction here in our holy writ... Jesus is in essence saying that if you remember nothing of this short life, remember this: We are to let go of our anger... anger infects us and our world with evil... anger kills.... and so do angry words... we must watch what we say to our brother, our sister... words can kill as well... let go of anger!.... Be faithful in relationships, all relationships.... don't be preoccupied to please self alone... be reconciled with our neighbor... if we are at enmity with brother or sister, then we choose death; open yourself up to the other... even unto the world's folly.... open up in sacred vulnerability, and... let yes mean yes... and no mean no.... don't equivocate... don't sugarcoat... don't hedge; We are to live lives of rigorous honesty... These are simple things, simple things we know to be true, but simple things of profound consequence... for our sake and for the world's sake as well... for the sake of salvation... and such a choice is as hard as plucking out an eye, or losing a hand; Such a life takes utter sacrifice... It is the harder choice.

And this life is not aloof from human commerce... For centuries the church has withdrawn into its ivory towers far from the snares of everyday life;... It has followed blindly its own rules, remained mute in the face of the wrong choices of the powers and principalities of our world (the world God loves); It has abdicated its prophetic role in the world's creation... a creation

still in its becoming. History still being written, choices yet to be made. The time is now as it has forever been... the time is now upon us to be engaged with our world; to choose life for the world.... We are to make our life choices amid the fabric of human commerce, with honesty and imagination... amid the social, the economic, amid the political, the spiritual... all a connected whole... all components of a life of well being and dignity... all components of salvation in short.

Pray for courage dear friends... pray you make the choice... the only choice... For the world around us, the world so very near to us, hangs in the balance between life and death...and we are responsible... we are called to it...God's life in earth trembles in the balance, and depends on us...Choose life and it will be given... Choose life always good souls... choose life.