

Pentecost16, Proper 21, Year A 2014

“For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him...”

With the internet and social media there are more and more blogs written by clergy these days....some, though few, are pretty good... but most for me fall into the category of “what drives me crazy about the church”.... Most writers acquiesce to the same old dogmatic language all too familiar to us; language that has become ossified with careless overuse... as if such language continues to carry some sort of authority... I read a blog just this week written by an Episcopal priest in Cincinnati, editor of the *Forward Movement* publication, in which the good father was decrying what he perceived as a liberal revisionist movement in the church; also called the progressive movement, the emerging church movement... a movement that has brought us gender inclusive language with which we speak of God; a renewed challenge to a literalistic approach to scripture; and a means to place scripture into creative conversation with post modern culture.... This movement in the church has been going on for at least five decades and in no small way it has challenged and continues to challenge the way we’ve spoken of and enacted the Christian vision in the past, versus how we might speak of faith and act it out in our current context... in short, it is challenging the way we’ve always done it.... This movement birthed the Jesus Seminar, for those of you who know what that is.... And for those who don’t, it is a group of scholars which have taken a literary and historically critical approach to scripture taking into account the literary, historical, and social contexts in which the gospels were written... deconstructing them, as it were, in order to reconstruct a believable theology, true to the text, without superstition and the baggage the church teaching over the centuries has laid upon it; and there’s a lot of baggage....and then there’s relevance... Our faith must be relevant! “You are the Messiah, the Son of God,” Matthew has Peter say... That’s been enough for many in the church over the years... but just what does that mean.... Jesus, our Lord and Savior... what does that mean? We should know shouldn’t we?... If we are going to give our lives to such a vision, really... then we should know what we are talking about when it comes to faith beyond a catch phrase or slogan. Right?

Among other things with which I took issue in this blog was the author’s statement that the church needs to quit talking so much about social justice and talk more about salvation... Does that bother y’all... ? It bothers me... as if justice and salvation are somehow unrelated... So I want to talk about salvation... I want to talk about salvation the way the writer of Matthew’s gospel talks about salvation... Salvation, one of those church words that we don’t bother to consider beyond a catch phrase or slogan....and indeed salvation is a principal theme in Matthew, just as it is in the other gospels... just as it is throughout the whole of scripture... It is the chief aim to which all of the mythology, all of the rhetoric, all of the poetry, all the theology of scripture bears witness.... So I want to revisit, if you will, the premise, the idea of salvation as it is presented in our sacred scripture.

First of all salvation is not personal... It is not about me... Jesus is not our personal savior... Salvation has to do with community, the salvation of a people...In Hebrew scripture during the eras of the patriarchs, the judges, and the monarchy, salvation was about the well-being of the people... It was the job of the patriarch or the judge or the king to see to the well-being of their people... to see that there was food enough... to see that there was security and safety....to see that

the people lived without shame, that they lived dignified lives.... The chief concern of all the prophets, both minor and major, from Isaiah to Malachi, was that the leadership of Israel tended with justice to its people... When Isaiah speaks of a savior to be born of a virgin... He is speaking of new leadership for Israel (Hezekiah in particular) who will govern the people with mercy and equity... It was recognized in the social philosophy of the ancients that unless the whole of society lived in equity, then no one lives with equity... that the health of society has everything to do with equity among the elite and the marginalized as well... that until the lost and forgotten are at table, as it were, then there is no salvation... Salvation then is synonymous with the good of the whole. If there is anyone who is not saved, then none of us are saved.

And that leads to the second point.... Salvation is not a future event.. certainly not something one attains in the next life; scripture does not speak of heaven as a future event, nor as an otherworldly place... For some reason (probably the need for control) the church has gotten that wrong... Salvation in Hebrew scripture and in the gospels, and in Paul is about the way we live now; on earth as it is in heaven... and again it is not about us... salvation is something we bear to the community, to the world... In that regard, salvation is a process, a process of the good, a way of life, a vocation in which we work for the good of the whole... a calling... We are called to the work of salvation... That is Jesus' legacy: That we live our lives for salvation... Salvation is not a commodity... something we get... It is a way of life... a life of sacrifice and love of our neighbor.... It is our lives lived for the least and lost... those not included, those not at God's bountiful table... It is our lives lived for the good, God's kingdom, God's commonweal, that transforms our world... salvation is an ongoing process of drawing all to the heart of God.

And finally, Salvation has everything, everything to do with the social, everything to do with the economic, everything to do with the political... How we live together as a people is what our faith is all about, at least if we are paying attention to scripture.... So to speak and act for affordable health care.... to speak and act for just wages... to speak and act for civil rights.... To speak and act for clean air and water, and a sustainable planet... to speak and act against violence in any form it takes... to welcome the stranger, to feed the hungry to take care of our least... these are all issues of salvation, gospel issues.... To say that we as people of faith have no business to speak of such things in the public sphere is abject heresy.... Our call is to see to the well being of our neighbor... That's it.... And we gather here Sunday after Sunday to remind ourselves of that.... We use carefully chosen words in dramatic fashion, and make beautiful music because this is what matters profoundly at the heart of things... We come to this altar to remember that, no less than Christ's body and blood, our bodies and blood are to be given as nurture for a starving world... Perhaps the most important part of our liturgy is the part when we leave... when we go out into the world empowered to bear the good... to enact the kingdom of God, no less.

In today's passage Jesus is calling out the powers that be of his day, just like the prophets before him, calling out the powers that be for not living up to the way of Justice... Our translation uses the word righteousness, but make no mistake, the word in the Greek means **justice**... We are to live the way of justice which is the way of salvation.... And we are told that it takes an honest commitment... One brother promises to work in the vineyard and does not go... the other refuses to work and then changes his mind... Matthew is holding up for us a model of repentance.... For us to take an honest look at why we are here, and then to act on what we know to be true... Faith is not so much belief as it is action..... acting for the true and the good... There is nothing

more grand in this life; no metaphor can quite touch it... nothing with greater authority than to act in love... to be saviors, all of us together, in solidarity with the Christ... The vineyard is ripening as we speak... Will you go? Will you live into the grand mythology of what it means to be human: the very vessels of God's life?... Will you go?