

Christ the King 2015

You know, the organized Christian enterprise, the church, in our post-modern world more and more struggles with relevancy. For centuries the mantra has been... Just believe in Jesus and everything will turn out O.K. Find God's plan for your life and everything will make sense, have purpose. And certainly in our post-enlightenment world, a world in which the individual has been lionized, a world in which the individual is deemed to have a radical autonomy, we have been taught that salvation is a personal thing, all about me... Believe in Jesus and one is assured a place in heaven... it is me that matters... God loves me... Jesus died for me. We are admonished from the Christian self-help community to "let go and let God", and one can take hold of some sanity in the midst of a world that appears more and more insane... The religious enterprise has forever sought to bring order amid the ambiguity and chaos of our world.... But I want to suggest that the religious life, at least in modernity, has been one more of escape than anything else, and it has also been about judgement and exclusion... perhaps those things are related: escape, judgement, exclusion. Modern religious life bids us to bide our time in this fallen world until the final consummation comes about... when we go to heaven and live in perpetual bliss. When everything at last will be set right.

There is a large bible study that meets in Mobile... a bible study that is apparently linked to other study groups around the country... studying the book of Revelation, all these groups at the same time... a book about the so-called end times...the apocalypse. It is a group, as I understand it, that looks for God to enter the world, as if God is absent, and do battle with the evil forces that beset us... a final consummation of heaven and earth....that the reign of God is a decidedly future event.... The church has bought in to that pathology for centuries... teaching that the world is fallen, ruled by evil... that one day, one day, God will set things right. In the meantime we wait... we wait for God to do something.

And of course there is always plenty of evidence for a world gone wrong... Just this week with the terrorist attacks in Paris, and in Mali, we have all been reminded of our human brokenness... humankind's proclivity towards violence... And the default reaction is FEAR... Buried in our DNA is the flight or fight instinct.... Perhaps early on in the evolution of our species fear was necessary... necessary for our survival.... Fear is alluring... It engenders in us a dark ecstasy...We are addicted to it, as it were.....It characterizes the modern world. But I am convinced that scripture teaches us an alternative... an alternative to fear.... It teaches that fear is not our true nature... that our true nature is love. Do y'all believe that? That is no small thing. That is not a sentimentality... That is a choice between life and death. A choice between Fear or Love.

Throughout scripture we are taught to check our xenophobic tendencies... our fear of the stranger.... The scribes of scripture have offered a way of life up and against the way it has always been, at least as long as the domination of patriarchy... the ways of aggression, violence and fear. They speak of a way of life that they argue is our true nature... our true nature that requires us to think critically, to practice perspective, to call on our imaginations, to seek goodness... Our true nature demands more of us than a passive acquiescence to dogma... Faith is so much more about practice than it is about belief.

It is a predominant theme in Hebrew scripture, and in the gospels that we are to welcome the stranger... to welcome the immigrant, to be precise, that's the word in the Greek... The entire theological premise of Judaism is that God chose a people to be an outward and visible sign of God's love... that God chose a people to be a light to all nations... actually to be a light to all "ethnicities"... That's Genesis 17... And this is not so simple as being polite, being nice to our neighbors... There is something profoundly true about us that our very wellbeing and enlightened self-knowledge is all wrapped up in our embrace of the other... It is as if we discover our true selves in knowing and caring for our neighbor... It is a way, perhaps... the way, that God's love breaks into our world, not as some future fantastical promise, but here and now and real. Love does not live in a belief system... Love must be practiced.

So this of course has everything to do with our world today, and the church's relevance to it. In John's gospel from which we just read... Jesus is holding up for us the tension between worldly kingship... and the kingship of Jesus.... Worldly kingship is all about fight or flight... And if you are powerful enough, you fight... Worldly kingship is about power and control and self-interest, and it is violence that is the means to such ends... It is the way it has always been in recorded history... despite the lessons of history in which we have learned, or should have learned, that violence only begets violence... It is, in short, the way of fear. People at dinner parties in Mobile are actually talking about the possibility of Isil marching down Selma Street... Politicians are rattling the sabers of war... bombings, no fly zones, boots on the ground, destruction of the Muslim, death to the other... It is the fear card... Fear, that dark ecstasy that wins votes, motivates the willful ignorant, pacifies the indifferent... and most of all it is fear that maims the victims of our world first. And it leads us to embrace the great modern heresy of: Security... The rhetoric we are hearing as we speak, is all about security, being safe... as if that is our only reason for living... Politicians who call themselves Christian, are saying that it is too dangerous to take in the dispossessed victims of the violence in our world... that our blessed security would be compromised... that we might not be safe... but you know what?... life is not safe. It never has been.

Brothers and sisters, as nuanced and contradictory as scripture can often be, it is clear on this: We are to welcome the stranger, the immigrant... not just for their good,

but also for our own.... Welcoming the immigrant is about the fulfillment of the human community, which is what God is about... recognizing that we are not complete without the other... that we are less... love is less, without our welcoming the one unknown to us... unknown, but radically connected to us...we are progeny of the very same DNA... brothers and sisters... with whom, as our bishop put it,...we are intimately entangled....

Jesus in the gospel of John is the archetype of who we are... who we truly are...Our true identity... Jesus is not a singular super-human who alone is good... He represents the possibility of goodness in us all. And Jesus taught that we don't belong to the worn out and destructive and violent ways of the kingdoms of men... We belong to the truth... and the truth is....We are born for one thing only... and that is to love... and friends... love is always risky... Love implies vulnerability and trust, and it would be our undoing if we fail to practice the trust and vulnerability of love. That is the vocation of the baptized... to risk for love, the inherent danger notwithstanding.

Love trumps security... always... If one of the ten thousand Syrian refugees turns out to be a terrorist... and the rest, the 9,999 are empowered with dignity and well-being and agency, then we are better for it... the world is better for it. I would rather die for love than live a life of fear... At each resurrection appearance in this gospel, Jesus tells the disciples to fear not... Fear is not of God... It is something to stand nobly against by practicing this faith to which we belong. That is the profoundly relevant role of the church... to practice love in the face of fear... Love conquers fear... believe it! And for God's sake live it.