

FOUR AFTER PENTECOST – 2021

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer.

Amen.

Frequently there is in the Collect of the Day a phrase so stunning that it takes my breath away. Most of them were written by Thomas Cranmer, the great 16th Century Archbishop of Canterbury who wrote much of our original Book of Common Prayer. If you want to know how Anglo-Catholicism differs from Roman Catholicism, read the Collects. They do not just reveal Cranmer's theology, they have helped to shape ours over the centuries and across many cultures. Cranmer uses both biblical and cultural images; he speaks in a language that is both eloquent and elegant and common enough for us commoners to understand. Some of them are very British, which is his culture, but most of them have a spiritual dimension that speaks beyond the limitations and narrowness of any and every culture.

We have one of those images today: "Make us have perpetual love and reverence for your holy name, for you never fail to help those whom you have *set upon the sure foundation of your loving-kindness.*" The foundation of your loving-kindness, the essence of all that really counts in this world: God's attitude and longings and intentions for us. I am a little troubled by the introduction, to "make us have perpetual love," because the nature of free will as God has given each and every one of us is our capacity to make choices, even to choose God or not, but I can live with this invocation given the power of the image of "the sure foundation of your loving-kindness." It takes me back to another phrase which I think says essentially the same thing, a phrase that appears in the Prayer of Humble Access, in which we address God as the One "whose property is always to have mercy...."

I do not know about you, but I grew up in a different Christian tradition. It was similar to ours, both Trinitarian and Christocentric, and like Anglicism, it emphasized faith and not works. In our theology, we do not earn our way into God's grace; it is a gift that comes with faith. But no matter how hard those pastors tried to preach grace, what I heard week in and week out was an emphasis on sin, as if it were more powerful than God's grace. From those sermons, my sense of the God of Hebrew scripture was God as the "celestial sniper," the One who was just waiting to get us for something. Perhaps you remember Maude in the 1970s sit-com who—whenever someone crossed her or simply did not agree with her—lashed out: "God will get you for that."

The first time I went to an Episcopal Eucharist in 1964, when I heard God described as the One "whose property is always to have mercy," that phrase absolutely stunned me. I realized that these Episcopalians, these Anglicans actually believed that was the first and foremost thing we needed to know and affirm about God. It was, and I hasten to add, it IS the very nature of the being of God. This is no angry parent we need to appease as in some religions, no greedy, controlling force we need to buy off with lavish gifts and sacrifices, no petulant, whimsical being we hope to come before when he or she is having a good day. This is the constant, the ground-zero of God, the essential nature without any flickering or passing away: "whose property is always to have mercy." That one, brief phrase that I heard almost sixty years ago, changed my life—my whole understanding of God and of life itself. It helped me to see that God is always approachable, that we may come to God with even those dimensions of ourselves that we are ashamed of, or afraid of, or cannot stand about ourselves when we look in the mirror and see ourselves for who we really are.

When we come into God's presence, we see who we really can be, and there is, at the same time, a grace that gives us the capacity to embrace more hope, to take in more forgiveness, to risk more loving.

St. Paul is trying to teach this to the Corinthians. He has visited and spent time with them twice, and is preparing to visit again, for what will be his last time among them. Paul worries about them; they are his flock, and he loves them deeply, but he gets stories of all the petty squabbles that arise in faith communities, the jealousies, the power struggles, the exaggeration of some teachings beyond what is true which lead people down false paths. In today's excerpt from his second letter, he gives them a clarion call to persuade them to listen to him, for the simple reason that he has been faithful, faithful to God and faithful to them in the entirety of the ministry he has had among them, both when he was with them and from afar. Every once in a while, Paul gets wound up like a dervish. As people say in Black congregations, "he leaves off teaching and takes up preaching." The end of Romans, chapter 8 is like that, when he says, resoundingly, with all kinds of descriptors, "I am convinced...that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." The verses ring with power and clarity.

Here Paul is speaking "in the Spirit," as it were, like last week. That's why he is using the word "we," rather than claiming it is all about him. He is not describing what he has the power to do of his own accord, but what the grace of God has brought about by the Spirit that is within him. Listen again to what he says, "We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown and yet are well-known, as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything."

As I hear this yet again this year in our cycle of readings, it brings up for me the many experiences that Paul has lived through, the many occasions in which he experienced God's grace to endure, to persevere, to triumph. While it often sounds like he is boasting, he is, as he so rightly claims, boasting in the Lord: yes, this has happened through my presence among you, but God has done this. I think this humility, this giving all credit to God is eventually what got through to the 12 disciples. Of course, they did not trust him, for he had been persecuting them as a religious official of the Temple. Jesus had brought about Paul's conversion apart from them, so they had to look at the fruits of Paul's ministry to judge whether he was true to who and what he said he was, whether he was true to God. It took them time, and it seems that some carried a bit of jealousy if not suspicion about him. Yet Paul finally emerged as a leader and one of the most pre-eminent spokespersons for the young Christian Church.

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How do we fit this Jesus story in here? We began today with the image of "the sure foundation of [God's] loving-kindness," but the picture we have here is of a boat being tossed about by the winds and swamped by the waves. There is no apparent sure foundation there. I will abstain from any descriptions of seasickness, but my guess is that even some of the fishermen in their midst were suffering. Think of Lake Winnebago: the combination of size, both length and width, and its shallowness, makes it one of the roughest lakes in a storm in our state. So with the Sea of Galilee, a similarly shallow body of water.

We are not told they were terrified, but afterward, Jesus refers to their fear and asks, “Why were you afraid? Have you still no faith?” The point here is that they were frightened enough to disturb Jesus’ sleep, to wake him up. Obviously, the storm was not enough to trouble him; he does not seem even to have noticed the turbulence. He slept right through it. When he awakened, he simply scolded the wind and said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!”

Is this simply a fantastical story? Did Jesus really calm both the wind and the sea? Remember, the Great Lakes (to which this is the equivalent) are usually the roughest the day after a storm. So did the turbulence really stop right then and there? I have gotten to the point in my life where I do not mind whether a miraculous story is based either in science or history or neither. There are things that happen in the hearts of the human beings involved in certain events that are so powerful that we know the experience was miraculous in some ways. Why waste our time debating whether this was a miraculous calming of the sea or a miraculous calming of the disciples and those in the boats surrounding them? Aren’t most miracles about things that happen inside of us? I think so....

The point here and in so many other stories that involve Jesus is about his calming presence. How many times does he greet them with “Peace be with you”? He does it when greeting people on the road in a casual way, and he does it in his post-Resurrection appearances.

Jesus is always offering, even “giving away” God’s peace, and lives are changed by that very giving. Isn’t that what is happening to us here every week? I think so....

I want to conclude with another story that comes out of the Holocaust. It was told by Elie Weisel, the great Jewish thinker and writer of the mid- and late 20th Century who endured and survived Auschwitz. As was the custom in that horrible prison, when Jews were being killed on the gallows, all the inmates were lined up in rows on the parade ground, and they were forced to stand there, faces forward, eyes wide open, watching the gruesome spectacle, with a penalty of death for looking away. That day, some number of men and teen-age boys were brought forward, and each was fitted with a noose. At a certain point a signal was given, and the floor beneath each of them fell away. Most of the men died soon, if not immediately, when their necks were broken. But there was one 14 year old boy who was so emaciated that his body was not heavy enough to break his neck. Weisel heard a voice behind him saying, repeatedly, insistently, “Where is God? Where is God?” This went on and on as the boy hung there thrashing about in his noose. “Where is God? Where is God? Where is God?” Finally, Weisel said, “There is God, hanging from that noose.”

Weisel, in that moment came to the realization that whatever humanity suffers, God suffers with us, and he found comfort and hope in that awareness.

Our gospel story post-dates early Hebrew theology, even the living of that theology 2,000 years later in the Holocaust. But the stories are very similar in what we can learn from them. We are not on the parade

ground of Auschwitz, but we often recognize that we are in a boat; we are in “the same boat” with each other, sharing the human condition and Jesus is in that boat with us, as he was with the disciples. Just as Weisel recognized the presence of God among them, so we can call upon the presence of Jesus among us. Truly, we are “set upon the sure foundation of [God’s] lovingkindness.” *Amen.* *+JJ*