

## **PENTECOST XII – 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.*

Thirty years ago, in 1991, I had my first sabbatical, and I spent all of it in the Far East: Thailand, Nepal, Malasia, Singapore, Japan and Hong Kong. I did not enroll in any course, except a one-month trek with other Christians split between the Himalaya in Nepal and the hill country of Northern Thailand. This was not to be a book-learning sabbatical, but a time of new experiences and a lot of reflection. It was life-enriching and life-changing for me. I knew that I would be attending Anglican churches in each of those countries, so I formulated the beginning of a conversation with a question for the clergy I would meet. First, I stated this: "You are serving a Christian congregation in a culture in which most of the people are inheritors not only of a social and political culture, but of a culture shaped by and grounded in another of the world's great religions, Hinduism and Buddhism and Islam, or some variant of one of these. Those cultures and traditions have formed the people and their thinking about life and how we live it and our relation to a deity if they believe in one." My question was this: "What dimension of the gospel of Jesus Christ is most winning, most compelling to the people around you?"

My question comes partially out of one of the phrases in today's Collect about "the fruits of [Jesus'] redeeming work." I can never limit those fruits to any one particular gift, to any one profound reality or blessing. I take that quite literally, in the plural as "the fruits," the many blessings that Jesus' life, death and resurrection give to us, enough in quantity and variety and spiritual richness and depth to reach every human soul. Think of our gospel for today, which is yet another part of John's long

chapter on Jesus as the “bread of life.” John opens us to understand that Jesus is our true food and drink, the sustenance of our lives. I trust we have come to believe that for ourselves, but that is not where we begin our journey into the heart of God. Receiving Jesus is what we practice, meaning what we do again and again and yet again, and it becomes clear to us in time that the Eucharist is life itself. Think of it: we have just come out of an extended period of being prohibited from sharing Eucharist together because it was feared that it could carry a lethal virus. That was true in other periods of history when humanity was beset by a plague or a pandemic. When I joined you just shy of a year ago, I heard your deep longing to receive the Eucharist again, to be reassured of God’s love through this sacrament, to be given Jesus’ very health and life through this sacrament. And several weeks ago, on the first Sunday we were able to receive Communion again, there was great rejoicing among us! Eucharist is what we have come to know as the ongoing presence, power and grace of God. My question to those clergy I met, and now to you, is what brings us to God, what brings us to practice and live out God’s presence among us? How were we attracted to open ourselves to God’s presence in the depth of our own lives in the first place?

I will come back to that, because what I learned from clergy who served among people of other religions helped me to rethink much of my own faith. I shall try to do this without over-simplifying those great religions, because God has spoken and speaks to the human heart through each of them, and this is not about trying to show Christianity as superior to any of them, although admittedly, Christianity is where I feed my soul.

There is a belief in Hindu culture and tradition that we shall be born again, perhaps as something better, perhaps as something more lowly, and it is accompanied by a belief that it all depends on us, on how

honorably we live our lives. I am not sure what is “honorable,” but my guess is that virtues are pretty similar in every religion and tradition. But think of this: what if everything depends on you? Do you remember our baptismal covenant when we make all those promises to God? They are outlandish, and I mean that literally, “out of this earth”—beyond our capacity to do them, and so we have that wonderful phrase which we add to our answer “I will;” we say, “*with God’s help.*”

Like Hindus, we who are Jewish and Christian live under a similar reality, perhaps a similar threat, the dichotomy of heaven and hell. Ours is not about coming back in a lesser state; it is about not coming back at all, ever or anywhere; it is about being snuffed out totally so that we do not exist as part of any life; we are obliterated, gone forever. That is compounded in literature by the description of our souls being tortured in hell from which we can never escape. I am mindful of Dante’s phrase over the gates of hell: “Abandon all hope ye who enter here.”

We Christian clergy have been given some promises of a larger reality which we can offer you, promises which may lead to salvation. I do not know what Hindu clergy are able to offer their people, or whether they can proclaim anything that seems to be more than a constancy of uncertainty. I think of our inability to be perfect in any way—with the possible exception of three minutes in a specific Olympic event when the rare athlete scores a perfect 10. So, what kind of hope is it if all depends on us? And if there is no hope, what difference does it make how we live our lives?

Let’s stick with Christianity, before I get into any more trouble by oversimplifying a world religion about which I know very little. We Christians are left with the possibility of an either/or, either heaven or

hell, either eternal life or eternal damnation. Yet the Church, that is, a great number of Christian scholars in several denominations, has come to a different understanding of concepts like devil, damnation and hell. Much of this new thinking occurred within the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The result is that none of the threats about punishment and death seem to be taken seriously anymore. So, the phrase "Fear the Lord," in the 34<sup>th</sup> Psalm which we sang this morning and in many other psalms and readings in scripture, seems rather empty and useless to our modern ears. We have come to believe that God does not want to destroy the world under any circumstances, that God is not out for vengeance, and I think that leads us to believe there is no longer any accountability for our actions, no matter how unethical, no matter how criminal, no matter how life-denying they are. PB++Michael Curry preached last year on Pentecost about two pandemics sweeping our culture, the pandemic of Covid and the pandemic of self-centeredness. I do not see any lessening of that self-centeredness in the fourteen months since our Presiding Bishop preached that sermon. I think that there is a noticeable decline in our human kindness to one another in our society. We see this self-centeredness in all of this business about masking and not-masking. That is a sign that we consider our "personal will" as more important than the common good and the common health of our society.

I want to refer to the psalmist's use of the phrase: "fear the Lord." Why bother? What is there to fear if neither God nor our society are going to hold us accountable for our actions? Perhaps we have come to believe that the God of Israel has gone soft and no longer has standards to which God holds us accountable. Perhaps. Or perhaps there is something essential here that we have lost sight of or have failed to see or acknowledge altogether.

I think back to the Creation story, in which God created a universe of multitudinous dimensions. And yes, God's mind surpasses human understanding, but there is in the universe a certain beauty of order and cohesiveness. Great scientists and mathematicians describe this with wonderment and awe, even when they are not believers in a deity who created all of this. Sometimes it is called "natural law," or "the natural order." Very simply, when considering our behavior on a personal level, we have to consider the limitations to that behavior before it becomes self-destructive, like consistently eating too much or consuming too much alcohol or too many drugs. This is not an arena in which we see God acting vengefully, but there are definite limits to what we can get away with and live.

On a larger scale, when humanity is considering some new experiment, some new way of living, one of the questions is, "Will nature permit it?" Think of that in the most expansive way: will nature be able to bear the consequences of that new behavior without being diminished or destroyed? We humans rushed headlong into the age of fossil fuels during the beginning of the last century, and it was not until well past the middle of that century that we began to realize we were doing vastly more harm than good. We have now been warned for decades that there are clear limits to what our planet can bear in carbon assaults to the ozone layer. For many years, we have been exceeding that safety zone in which the planet may remain healthy. That always seemed "way out there in the future," sometime after our own deaths. Why worry about something that will not affect us? Let our grandchildren deal with that! And yet our society is investing less in their education than our forebears invested in ours, which will leave them ill-prepared to solve far more complex and complicated problems than we face at present. And now, just this month we have heard that we have surpassed another critical point of just how much damage

there will be to the environment even if we could shut down all those carbon assaults today. We are experiencing the consequences of our game-playing with nature already, in the here and now.

What I am trying to say is this: fearing the Lord in our day and age is not just about our personal behavior and any kind of direct reward or retribution from God that is merely a personal consequence for us. Fearing the Lord is about all of us learning how to live in awe of life as God has created it, not thinking that we are so damned smart that we can ignore consequences to the whole of creation that are part of our own making. The “pandemic of the unvaccinated,” one of those consequences, and the state we are currently in, is a clear example and proof of that. I always find it difficult to be very hard on those who are being misled, but those who do the misleading, those who perpetrate lies, those who spread falsehoods that lead to the deaths of others are truly committing murder, perhaps even genocide if we look at the magnitude of it. I do not focus on retribution for them; we do not have time to wait for the slow turning of the wheels of justice. But I do want us to find ways to get back to some common ground of truth and truthfulness, about the very nature of creation, about our likely effects on it, about the ways in which we can be co-creators with God, instead of working against God.

Fear the Lord: look in awe at the wonder of creation. Be aware of its magnificence, its grandeur, its majesty. Look in awe, too, at its fragility, as we pray in one of our Eucharistic prayers for “this fragile earth, our island home.” Be aware also of the consequences of our human behaviors which bring death and destruction to the created order in so many ways.

As John the Baptist would say, as Jesus himself would say, "Repent, rethink what you are doing, and return to the Lord." *Amen.*

*+JJJ*

