

Coping With The 6:00 O'clock News

Easter V, May 19, 2019

The civil war in Syria. Over half a million are homeless, traumatized, lost. Genocide in Myanmar and South Sudan. Russia's war on Ukraine. The global crisis among indigenous populations. The global rise of political movements that openly vilify minorities and migrants. These are just some of the "big" stories that enter our homes and our minds on the 6:00 o'clock news. And there are also plenty of "smaller" stories of violence, disorder, and tragedy right here at home that the news keeps us informed about.

When we hear all of this bad news, what happens to us? Most of us, I think, feel afraid. We feel anxiety and sadness. We feel outraged. We also often feel discouraged, and perhaps even hopeless. We think that we, **or someone**, should be able to do something to repair this mess, to make the world a better place.... but the magnitude of the problems is so great that we often can't really imagine how **anyone** could make a real difference. We can feel despair.

But we can only take so much of this. When we've been oppressed again and again by fear and outrage, hopelessness and despair, we can easily start to develop callouses -- cynical views that "the world is going to hell in a hand-basket, and there's really nothing anyone can really do about it." Cynicism can be strangely comforting. It can free us from our worries about how we will ever make a difference. But hardening our hearts is not the answer.

So how can we prevent these negative outcomes, or be healed if they are already afflicting us? Some would say, "*Just don't watch the news! Period!*" That is surely an option. And if we are feeling fragile already, it may well be a good option. But others of us would quickly respond: "*I believe it's my **responsibility** to stay informed about what is happening in the world around me.*" And there is certainly truth in that. So if we choose to watch it, how can we protect ourselves from falling into despair and cynicism? How can we develop a frame of mind that will help us to cope **well** with all the darkness that can be cast on us during the 6:00 o'clock news?

It is sometimes helpful to remind ourselves that "the news" isn't **simply** about transmitting "the truth" to us. To remind ourselves that the news industry does in fact **benefit** from leading us into feeling afraid, outraged, discouraged and hopeless, for those states prime us emotionally to respond to the commercial advertising that is interspersed strategically throughout the hour. The many products and services which promise to make us feel better about ourselves and our world (... if we buy them.) This manipulation is quite conscious. It is, by and large, how the television industry makes its money and keeps us coming back for more. So we are wise to become aware of this dynamic, and to be mindful when we turn on our TVs, that this dynamic is almost always at play, so that we can inwardly **resist** its influence, instead of simply being manipulated by it. This is not easy, though.

It requires us to go into the experience of watching the news with a positive outlook. As Christians, having a positive outlook does not mean simply dismissing the negative. That only breeds false hope. Instead, it means that we practice the spiritual discipline of **developing a balanced focus of attention**. We focus **not only** on the bad news, but **also on** the good news of how God is at work in the world, in our own lives and in the lives of others all around the globe. The 6:00 o'clock news will not do this for us. This is a spiritual discipline; it requires active, conscious work on our parts to **not let** our attention simply gravitate and become fixed on all that is wrong in the world. Instead, we follow the example of St. John in this morning's reading from the book of Revelation. We actively, consciously, remind ourselves to notice that "*as the **old** earth is passing away, a **new** earth is also*

coming into being” (Rev. 21:1). We actively, consciously remind ourselves to “*listen to the Lamb who is sitting on the throne, who is saying to us, 'See... I am making all things new'*” (Rev. 21:5).

These texts in Revelation are not merely speaking of a distant heavenly experience; they are also describing the Kingdom of God which is continually growing, as Jesus says, “**in our midst**”, here and now, throughout our world (Luke 17:21). Seeing this “New Earth” requires divine grace, the grace that gives us “eyes to see” (Mat. 13:15-16), but this grace **operates through the discipline of our attention**, through our focusing in on the good news of God's Kingdom on earth, wherever it may be found, even in the darkest of situations (Philippians 4:8). This is the kind of positive outlook that breeds genuine hope. Through it we see **not only** the darkness of the Old Earth that is passing away, **but also** the bright light of the New Earth that is coming into being. Maintaining this balance protects our hearts and minds from cynicism and despair.

But there are still larger questions that need to be answered for us to cope well. Terrible, unspeakable evils really **are** happening in our world. As Christians, how are we to **think** about all of this darkness? How are we to make meaningful, helpful sense of it all, so that we can respond in a spiritually intelligent way?

First of all, I think we have to resist the temptation to take refuge in shallow platitudes, which sound kind of “Christian,” but actually are not.

Sometimes we ask ourselves questions about the world like, “Why can't people just be nice to one another? Why can't people just be more decent, more kind, more compassionate? Why can't people just follow the Golden Rule?” Now, there is nothing wrong with these questions in themselves. But when they are not answered, or not answered fully enough, they degrade into shallow platitudes like, “**If only people would follow the Golden Rule, the world would be a place... where never was heard a discouraging word and the skies were not cloudy all day.**” And, of course, the flip-side to this is that “**The world is a terrible place because people just don't follow the Golden Rule!!!**”

Why indeed don't people just follow the Golden Rule?

Within our wisdom tradition, this is a question that has been carefully, prayerfully thought through – mindfully asked & answered -- for thousands of years, up to the present day. And one of the things that we have learned over the centuries is that when we we work *together* with God and one another to answer a pressing question, we discover that the question is often not as simple as we first imagined. Once we come up with an answer – if we keep our hearts and minds open – deeper questions arise, questions that require deeper answers.

I would like to offer you one of these deeper questions that emerges when we reflect on the real darkness in our world and seek to make helpful, meaningful sense of it. It is a “**how**” question. And the question is this: **How exactly does the Lamb of God take away the sins of the world?**

Many answers may come to mind that we have learned over the years – in Sunday School, in our own reflection on the Scriptures, in sermons, in courses we may have taken. Perhaps the shortest orthodox answer to the question is that “*The sins of the world are taken away by the saving power of the Blood of Christ.*” **OK..... But what does this actually mean?**

It could be taken literally, taken with a view that the **literal-liquid-of-Jesus'-blood** was somehow supernaturally magical, and so powerful that when those drops of blood touched down on the planet earth, they redeemed it – all of it – taking away all of the darkness, all of the sins of the world....., **if only** we believe.... and follow the right way..... the way that leads to eternal life.

But this is actually not what Jesus taught, nor is it (at least officially) what the Anglican Church teaches, for it misses the meaning of “Christ crucified.” While the Blood of Jesus was indeed a literal, physical reality, it becomes for us something much more. It becomes for us a **sacred symbol**.

Sacred symbols are not merely metaphors that we come up with; sacred symbols are inspired by, and actually participate in, the Divine Realities that they point to. And what is the Divine Reality that we are led to experience through the sacred symbol of the Blood of Christ???

It is the Reality of Divine Love, a love that knows no limits, a love that would even die for the wellbeing of its beloved, a love that takes away our **desire** to sin, because it meets the deepest needs beneath all of our desires. **This** is how the Lamb of God takes away the sins of the world -- by enabling humankind, by enabling **us**, to consciously take into our lives the Reality of Divine Love, which changes us, from the inside out, empowering us to love ourselves, and to love one another, with the same redeeming love (John 13:34-35). This possibility is the Good News. This possibility is how the New Earth, the Kingdom of God on earth, comes into being. This is how it works.

Other wisdom traditions have different “ways in” to experience this Divine Love and, through it, to form persons of genuine good will. And that is wonderful. But wherever this experience and this formation are absent, darkness takes over. It is very simple. But it is not simplistic. It is not just a platitude.

As we prepare to receive Holy Communion this morning, let's ask ourselves: “What are we really **ingesting** when we “eat his Body” and “drink his Blood” ??? In truth, we are taking into our hearts & minds & bodies the Reality of Divine Love for us; for our brothers and sisters at our sides; and for the whole world around us. We are allowing ourselves to be formed into persons of genuine good will.

This Love we take in is real. It is the Light that shines through the darkness and gives us the clarity we need to think wisely and strategically about how we can engage with God in creating a more loving, more just, more humane world. This Love is the very ground of our lives. It is what we need to experience before, during, and after we watch the 6:00 o'clock news. It is what we need to experience as we think through and talk with others about world events. This Love is what we need to experience as we sign petitions, as we knit prayer shawls, as we write our MP's, as we visit the sick in hospital and the poor at the *Inn of the Good Shepherd*, as we engage in fellowship, as we pray, as we work together to find other practical ways of caring for the most vulnerable in our midst and in our world.

You may find, as you reflect on these things this week, that they will give rise to **more questions** in your hearts and minds – questions that need answers, questions that will require us to have more good conversations with one another. And that is good. That is part of what church is all about.

Thanks be to God.

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