

The Gospel of Remembering (Part 2)

23rd After Pentecost, November 17, 2019

Last Sunday, Fr. Shaun helped us explore the *gift* of our power of remembering, and how central it is in our faith. How it enables the sacred story of the gospel to "come alive" in our minds, so that we get "carried away" by it, into "another world," an "inner world," that is a "better world" -- where we experience Jesus as our Lord, and ourselves as his Beloved. We reflected on how God's Spirit uses our power of remembering to make Christ consciously-present-to-us in the living of our daily lives -- renewing our minds with his truths & values & intentions; influencing our choices; inhabiting our lives more fully. We explored how crucial the power of remembering is in the sacred act of eating the bread & drinking the wine, how it takes us to a place where Christ is actively giving himself to us in the present moment, and we are actively taking him in. In the end, Fr. Shaun said, Christian life itself is simply many little daily acts of remembrance -- doing "this," doing "that" -- in active, conscious remembrance of him.

In all he shared with us last Sunday, his focus was on the good & life-giving effects of this great power (which is always the most important focus to take.) But it left me wondering... about "*another side*" of this power of remembering. So I asked him to let me preach a "Part 2" this morning on the "other side" of having this power.

Because there are not only ***benefits*** to having it; there are also ***risks***. Because the power of remembering is a ***neutral*** power. It can be used for good (for humanizing us and our world) -- but also for evil (for making us & our world less fully human.) Its power can make us more *virtuous* & happy..., but also more *vicious* & miserable... It depends on how we use it.

We could explore the risks of this power in a purely personal way: how ***the way we remember things can actually demoralize, distress & depress us*** -- whether it's the way we remember the stories of what's happened to us in our lives; or even the way we remember the story of Jesus. We could explore how, when that happens, those inner stories need to be carefully & wisely "edited," with the help of good friends, good spiritual community. That would be a theme worth exploring.

But instead, I'd like us to reflect today on how this great power of remembering can do harm in a ***"political"*** way. "Political" in the sense that it can shape the minds of large numbers of people, and even, if left unchecked, shape an entire culture. Political harm concerns us; we want to understand it, and how to respond to it. This is precisely the concern of Jesus when he warns us in today's gospel:

"Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and, 'The time is near!' -- [they will incite hope, and fear, and tempt you to get on their bandwagon] -- But do not go after them" (Luke 21:8.)

I've never preached on "false prophets" before. I think because it's so often distorted, even 'weaponized', by extremists for their own agendas (*not just in Christianity, but in Judaism & Islam as well.*) But that's not a good reason to "shy away" from the theme. If anything, it's a good reason to consider it more carefully.

So, as faithful, mindful Anglicans, *How do we **understand** "false prophets" in our day? How do we **recognize** them, and **diminish** their harmful influence, in our lives, and the lives of others?*

False "propheting" often seems to involve a powerful... charismatic... unstable... (*but very clever*) leader. A leader that, like all leaders, tells stories. But (*no surprise*) "false prophets" tell stories that are "falsely prophetic." They speak of "good news" to come, that is in truth "*bad news.*" Their stories are designed to "*hijack*" the creative power of remembering in the minds of their audience -- to lead them to create "other worlds" in their minds -- worlds which, although they are neither *true* nor *good*, are very compelling. Their stories often follow a *very simple pattern*. It sounds something like this:

- * **Remember** the great glory of our past! How **strong** and how **noble** we once were!
- * **But Look** at our present humiliation. How **weak & disgraced** we've become!
- * **And Recognize** who it is that has done this to us...

- * It's "**them.**" **They** -- have made **us** -- their victims!
- * "They" are not like "us." There is **no good** in them. They're **vicious** -- all of them -- like parasites! They've grown strong by making us weak.
- * **They** are *the real enemy* -- our greatest threat -- and they will surely destroy us if we let them.

- * **But fear not! All is not lost!**
- * **We can return!!!** ... to our former glory... **We can shine** like we once did!!!
- * ...but only -- if we get rid of our enemy once-and-for-all...
- * ...only -- if each & every one of us **commit** to this noble cause!
- * If we do, then **together**, step-by-step, we will take away their power, until their threat is gone for good.
- * **And we will become great again!!!**
- * **That will be Our Future ...**

- * ...if you are with me... if you accept and follow my plan...
- * **Are you with me !!! ???**

It's amazing how easily embraced, and how "contagious," such stories can be. Their drama can spread from one mind to another like wildfire. We've seen this happen in the history of Israel; of the Church; of Islam. We've seen it happen in virtually all of the atrocities, the great crimes against humanity.

We see it happening in present day politics -- such as the Arab-Israeli conflict. And (*some would disagree with me here, but*) I think we even see it happening next door -- in Mr. Trump's command, "*Let's make America great again!*" (*by getting rid of the undesirables, before they victimize us even further.*)

But **why** are falsely prophetic stories **so effective** at gaining the allegiance of so many?

For sure, there are *many* factors involved. But I'd like to focus on only one. On how the power of remembering to create "another world" in the human mind is truly **transforming** (either *for better, or for worse.*)

The common stories of a falsely prophetic leader use **the power of remembering** to take listeners back in time to "another world," where there was no pain, only pleasure --no blame, only praise-- no loss, only gain --no obscurity, only bright light & fame-- and "*the sky was not cloudy all day.*" He takes them in their minds to a Utopia. A world which was supposedly --but not really-- their own "*glorious past.*"

And, then, while they're still feeling that utopian bliss, his story quickly takes them to yet "another world," but this time, a Hellish one. A world of humiliating defeat & misery, which is supposedly -- but not really -- their actual present.

And finally, his story "pulls out all the stops" -- and **solves** -- the great predicament it has just created in people's minds. It explains that the reason why the listeners' worlds are *Hellish*, and not *Utopian* --*the root cause of their plight*-- is "**the enemy**" (which is *whatever scapegoat the leader wants to get rid of at the moment.*) So, now, all the listeners have to do if they want to move out of this Hellish world and back into Utopia, is "*get rid of 'the enemy'.*" And, to make that easier for them, the leader already has the perfect plan to make it happen. They only need to follow it, and their glorious past will become their glorious present. And many do follow.

Jesus tells us that we will know false prophets "by their fruits" -- by the *bitterness* within their seemingly "sweet" words & actions -- by the *bitter effects* they produce in the lives of their followers -- and the *bitter ends* they force upon their "enemies" (Matthew 7:15-20.) But not everyone recognizes the bitterness. The minds of many seem somehow clouded; they can't discern what's actually going on.

The thing to really notice well, I think, is that **when false prophets succeed**, they do so by hijacking the power of remembering in their followers' minds -- the power to inwardly create "another world" (that fills them with hope), and "another world" (that fills them with fear.) Because then, the choice of which world they want to be their own, seems like no choice at all. They vote for Utopia. It's a "*false vote*," a "*false choice*" -- because both of these worlds are *false*, merely propaganda. But they come to believe the prophet's Hell & Utopia are really real. And so become willing to do "whatever it takes" to get out of the one and into the other. There's nothing to think about. It's a "*no brain-er.*"

(If you think about it, it's all remarkably similar to the way the Serpent influences the minds of Adam & Eve in the ancient story of Eden.)

Good *Christian* remembering does not operate like that. Nor does good *Jewish*, or good *Muslim*, remembering. Good spiritual remembering does not make the painful realities of human existence disappear; nor does it magnify them into ghoulish proportions; nor does it "shut down" the powers of reason, or of conscience. Far from **diminishing** our capacities to make sound judgments & good choices, it **enhances** them.

True prophetic ministry, in any faith, helps us use this great power of remembering to take us to "another world," yes -- an "inner world," yes -- but a world in which divine order (divine reasoning, conscience, feeling, wisdom & will) are "built-in."

Through his **prophetic ministry** (*of the Word*) Jesus helped his disciples cultivate such an "inner world" in their minds. Through his **pastoral ministry** (*of hands-on Care*) he showed them how another world is even possible out there in the trenches -- by teaching them how to relate differently to others, including their "enemies." Through his **priestly ministry** (*of the Sacraments*) he led them through sacred rituals that "bridged" the invisible, spiritual world & the visible, physical one -- beginning with Baptism & The Eucharist -- with the physical water & bread & wine that "became for them" his very Life, his spiritual Body and Blood. All of these ministries, each in its own unique way, empowered them to "take back" this great power (*from Rome, from False Religion*), and to use it wisely.

When the Church is at its personal best --*when we're well nourished & exercised*-- our prophetic & pastoral & priestly ministries --*the ministries of all believers*-- do the same thing & get the same results, both personally & politically.

These three core ministries of Christ & Christ's Church empower us to "take back" our power of remembering, to hold on to it, and to use it wisely. They **decrease our vulnerability** to the "false prophets" of our day -- enable us to more clearly & easily "see the hook" beneath the bait, "hear the intentions" beneath the words. They **increase our skill** at helping others get free from their harmful influence. Because slowly but surely, **they empower us to live** -- more & more -- like Christ, both inwardly & outwardly. By consciously engaging in them together, we become his active, worldwide Body, and make the "false prophets" in our day -- *both religious & secular* -- much less likely to succeed. And that is good news indeed.

Thanks be to God.

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