

When Conscience Rises From The Dead

Easter Sunday, April 12, 2020

Anglicanism is quite an unusual species of Christianity. Our Communion is very clearly "orthodox" (with a small "o.") But, strange as it may sound, our orthodoxy is not conservative "**or**" liberal — nor conservative "**versus**" liberal — but both liberal "**and**" conservative at the same time.

For example, we whole-heartedly embrace the Holy Scriptures as "*containing all things necessary for salvation.*" But we **don't** say that everything written in the Bible is good. While we affirm that it contains "*all things necessary for salvation,*" we recognize that it contains harmful things as well — things which can become *obstacles* to salvation. And so — because our aim is to find & know "*the truth that sets us free*" — we do not blindly give our assent to everything we find written in the Bible (*just because "it's in the Bible."*) Instead, we acknowledge our need for "eyes to see" & "ears to hear" — our need for a discernment that is (at once) rational, wise, and guided by the Holy Spirit. And for the courage to say both "**yes**" and "**no**" — *at the right times* — to the written words of Scripture.

Another example of our orthodoxy is our actively, consciously "taking our place" within the Apostolic Tradition. We see this in our embrace of Eucharistic Liturgy and the other sacraments. We see it in our mindful, prayerful recitation of the ancient Creeds.

With respect to the Creeds, **how** we rely on them is a particularly good example of the unusual — both liberal & conservative — orthodoxy of Anglicanism. We hold to the ancient creeds as the condensation — the slowly formed pearls — of Christian wisdom gifted to us by our spiritual ancestors. They are not so much "beliefs" (*in the ordinary sense of the word*), as they are fundamental "meanings" or "truths" to be discovered, cherished, reflected on, and nourished by.

In their 'conservative' role, they act like "**buoys**" in a vast ocean of water. They "mark off" for us the **limits** of where it is safe & worthwhile to swim, and where it is not. It takes an awful lot of "swimming" — an awful lot of "trial & error" — to figure out just where these limits lie. And that is the work our forbears were called to do, "*for our good and the good of all the church.*"

In their 'liberal' role, the elements of the Creeds testify to the liberating fact that there is **precious little** that we can know for sure, and know in precise detail. For example, they tell us that Jesus descended to "*the realm of the dead.*" But they say nothing about exactly where that is, or about the "mechanics" of how he got there, or the details of what happened there. They even say nothing about the best interpretation(s) of what it all means. Only that it was "*for us and our salvation.*" In the same way, they tell us that Jesus **rose** from the realm of the dead. But again, they say nothing about exactly **how** that resurrection happened, or in exactly what **form** the Risen Jesus was made manifest. Only that it was "*for us and our salvation.*"

The fact that the creeds tell us precious little, suggests that the most **precious** truths are very few & very "bare" — and that elaborating on them any further — while it may well be interesting & sometimes helpful — is not certain. Anything beyond the limits of these very "bare" truths, cannot really be "nailed down," but tends to fluctuate from person to person, culture to culture, era to era. Now clearly, the writers of the creeds were extremely knowledgeable of the Scriptures. And clearly they each had their own, quite elaborate interpretations of the death & resurrection of Jesus. But when it came to discerning what was **essential** for the Church as a whole — what they would pass on to future generations — they were "minimalists." They added "nothing extra."

The 'conservative' role played by the creeds teaches us that we cannot somehow "**get away from**" the death & resurrection of Jesus — without jeopardizing the heart of faith in Christ. On the other hand, the 'liberal' role played by the creeds teaches us that the detailed meanings of Christ's death & resurrection "for us and our salvation," is **our** responsibility as the Church to "flesh out" — to **interpret** — for ourselves, and for our world. To interpret not in a "willy-nilly" fashion (*the worst sense of the term "liberal"*) — nor in a narrow, "closed-minded" fashion (*the worst sense of the term "conservative"*) — but to interpret honestly, rationally, wisely & compassionately — guided by the Spirit of Christ.

So what can we say this morning about the Resurrection of Christ? Once we accept that all we can know for sure is the bare truth that "**he is risen indeed,**" our tradition gives us a wide variety of orthodox options. But since, throughout Holy Week, we have been exploring the core practice of "self-emptying" in the life of Jesus, and how he was always at work, teaching his disciples how to "empty" their **own** minds of harmful illusions about God, themselves, and others — it might be helpful for us to focus on how the disciples finally began to "**get it**" after Jesus was raised from dead.

Let's focus on the real "hard case" — the case of Peter — the arrogant, argumentative, impulsive, deceptive loudmouth — whom Jesus chose to be the "rock" of his Church. Let's look at the "before" and "after." The **pre-resurrection** and the **post-resurrection** Peter.

On Palm Sunday, we heard Peter's loud declaration (on their journey down to Jerusalem) that "Jesus is the Messiah!" But in the next moment — when Peter found out that **THIS** Messiah planned on freely accepting his death (at the hands of the unrighteous, no less!) — we saw him pull Jesus aside and (verbally) "take a strip" off of him (for failing to be the **great, regal** kind of Messiah — whose glorious triumph over evildoers — Peter was hoping to share.) Jesus "rebuked him back" — telling him he was thinking like the Devil — because his mind is being **clouded** by *worldly concerns*, instead of being **made clear** by *divine ones*. But Peter didn't "get it."

Then, when they took a short side trip to the top of Mount Tabor, and Peter saw the brilliant glory of the transfiguration (with Moses & Elijah supporting Jesus about his descent into the darkness of Jerusalem), we saw Peter trying to **cajole** Jesus into just "staying put" on the mountain top & forgetting about his absurd descent. That time, it was God the Father who (*in a voice from a cloud*) told Peter to "shut up & listen" to his Beloved Son. But Peter still didn't "get it."

On Maundy Thursday, before the Passover meal, as Jesus was — *like a slave* — washing his disciples' feet, we saw how Peter just **could not bear** what he perceived as the indignity of it all. And we heard him blurt out, "You will **never** wash my feet!" And when Jesus explained the necessity of it, we heard Peter ridicule him, saying "*then you might as well give me a whole bath!*" And later, during the Passover meal, when Jesus told them that they would —**all**— betray him, it was Peter that we heard proclaim, "Though **all the others** become deserters —**I**— will **never** desert you. Even if I must **die** with you, I will not deny you." Needless to say, Peter still didn't "get it."

On Good Friday, when Judas led a detachment of Roman soldiers, along with the "religious police" to capture Jesus — we saw Peter spot **one last opportunity** to prevent the pointless & shameful death of Jesus. Violently, he drew his sword and chopped off the ear of the high priest's slave (one of the religious police.) It's interesting that Peter chose to attack the **slave**, and not one of the Roman centurions. But, in any case, we heard Jesus rebuke him again, and ask him the same basic question again — "*Am I not to drink the cup the Father has offered me?*"

And from there, as we saw, Peter was on the run. Ready to do whatever it took to prevent "*guilt by association*" — so that he himself would not be made to share in the shaming & suffering that Jesus was experiencing. After his famous threefold denial, when he heard the cock crow, and began to see in himself what Jesus had seen all along — but had loved him nonetheless — his thick walls finally start breaking down, and he wept, uncontrollably & bitterly. "*The victory of humility can only be the admission of its defeat*" (Francois Varillon). I imagine that all the angels & saints in heaven were compassionately crying out: "**It's about time....**" Peter is starting to "**get it.**"

The pre-resurrection portrait of Peter is not of one who has "no conscience."

On the contrary, Peter was **scrupulously** clear about what was "good" and what was "evil." The "good" was whatever brought him honour, gain, pleasure, praise & glory. And the "evil" was whatever brought him shame, loss, pain, blame & dullness. This extended to others as well. Those who were "good" (in his understanding of the word) deserved the greatest of rewards. Those who were "evil" (in his understanding of the word) deserved the greatest of punishments. A conscience of this sort isn't "lazy" — it grinds out work like a tireless machine — processing experiences, rendering judgements, and selecting the most proper responses. In terms of the spirituality we encounter in Jesus, however, a conscience of this sort is **"dead,"** completely lifeless. However "orderly" and "efficiently" it may operate, it feeds on destructiveness, and will do great harm to those it regards as "evil" — even to its own host — when he or she "slips up."

"Deserved" is the key word of a dead conscience. Everyone gets what they deserve, no matter what. Love, compassion, kindness, respect, attentiveness, patience & care are not "virtues" that extend to all, indiscriminately. They are "rewards" given only to those that deserve them, including oneself. The **formation** of a "dead" conscience is the end result of what we have been describing throughout Holy Week as the affliction of a person's mind's with harmful illusions about God, themselves, and others — generated by what Jesus called "the world."

And the **conscience** of the pre-resurrection Peter — was "dead as a door nail." You had to look out if you were not "good" in Peter's eyes. It would not be a rewarding experience. So it was really no wonder that Peter was so doggedly resistant, when Jesus would (again & again, in various forms) keep teaching him the same lesson about "emptying himself" — while Peter was working as hard as he could to **"fill himself up"** with all the things he thought were good. Every time Jesus brought it up, it was like throwing another wrench into the dead (*but busy*) machine of Peter's conscience.

But in the end, on Good Friday, when all his unhelpful walls begin to crack, and he breaks down in bitter tears, the Spirit of Christ doesn't just "leave him there" to wallow in his suffering (*even though much of it was tied to his own choices*). On the contrary, the Spirit lifts him up, treats his wounds, and begins forming a **living** conscience within him — modelled on the mind of Christ — rooted in the living law of love.

We don't hear from Peter again until today, in the first reading for Easter morning. And the Peter we find there is no longer the "hard case" we came to know in Holy Week.

Invited to the home of a Roman centurion, he warmly accepts the invitation to share what he's learned of Jesus — both before & after the crucifixion. And when all of these spiritually hungry folks — whom he once found despicable & deserving of death — are gathered around him, the first thing that comes out of Peter's *post-resurrection* mouth is "Now I truly understand that God shows no partiality but accepts everyone in every nation who respects him and does what is good."

So, very clearly, **"what is good"** no longer means what is honourable, praiseworthy, and glorious *"in the eyes of men."* Very clearly, the vicious "cogs" of Peter's dead conscience are no longer spinning. Within Peter, the tomb is also empty. A radically **new**, alive & life-giving conscience — grounded in the love of God in Christ — and moving through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit — has arisen.

Arisen indeed !!! Thanks be to God.