

I Make All Things New

Many of you comment from time to time that you enjoy these sermons, or have been affected by something said in them. What you should know is how frightening it is to stand before you each week; how frightening to prepare each week, to speak, one prays, one hopes, something that is of the word of God.

We preachers spend a great deal of time each week listening to the still soft voice as we struggle to prepare the weekly homily. The goal is not to arrive at something new each week, the goal is to hopefully hear, and pass along, what God wants each of us to hear. In that sense, I too am a listener, just as you are. And what we hear is not always, not even usually, cotton candy for the ears. For ours is a God who is intent on shaking us up, on pruning our wild branches, on purifying us to our very core.

There is the story of the old, bent over priest who, as he began his walk up to the high pulpit, stopped, and cried out: "No! I will not go into that terrible place!" Meaning, the pulpit. He stood silent for a moment, and then continued his climb.

I thought a lot about that old brother this week when I read today's readings. I grew pale. It's said we preachers can be cowards. And I am one. Luckily, we can blame the readings for what we have to say. Blame the text. This ain't me saying these things! This is the Scripture! And that is where things are today. So, I beg you, don't get mad at me for what's coming. Blame Isaiah! Blame Paul! Blame Jesus!

We are raised to believe that if Christianity is anything, it is the bedrock of the status quo. We are raised with "God, country and apple pie." "In God we trust" sits on our coins. We pledge to the flags as school kids, invoking God's name at least since 1954. So of course, Christianity is all about keeping things the way they are. A market economy, a powerful military, individual freedom and faith in Christ. That's the way it is! That's the way it should be!

Except, it's not.

The thing too many call or embrace or even ridicule as Christianity is not Christianity. The status quo, in fact, is the enemy of God, not God's friend. Thank God we have God's word, in Scripture, in Tradition, in Reason, to set us straight. To wake us up. The readings today are a fine example of that wake up call. And the readings today are loaded with dynamite.

It starts with the prophecy from Isaiah. Isaiah tells us today: God is about to do the impossible!

Have you heard this before?

"We the unwilling, led by the unqualified, having done so much for so long, with so little, we will now attempt the impossible, with nothing."

I think that could be the Christian motto. Because out of nowhere, God is about to do what "we know" cannot be done. Let me bring this into focus.

The Jews then, and we now, are armed to the teeth because war and conflict are regrettable necessities. If we weren't armed to the teeth, we would be over run, they said. We say.

All the good we have done will be wiped out. Tyrants will take over the world. As sad as war and money spent preparing for war is, that is Reality, they said. We say.

That was the scene confronting Israel when Isaiah prophesied. The neighboring empire was threatening invasion. The king of Israel doubled his military budget. Set up the draft. He would fight fire with fire. Guns against guns. Chariots against chariots. The king's best thinking, our best thinking, gets us to this point.

Yet God says through Isaiah: "HA!" "Trust in me!" "I am about to do a new thing!" Your horses, your chariots, your tanks, your fighter jets, they are extinguished! Quenched like a wick! It's right there, in Isaiah 43:16.

God tells Isaiah, tells us: "I will make a way through the wilderness of your fears, I will create rivers in the deserts of your trembling. I am about to do a new thing!"

Sadly, Israel didn't listen. They kept building chariots, and tanks, training horses, drafting soldiers. And Israel was wiped out.

It's so hard to stop trusting our own best thinking. It's so hard to question the status quo. It's so hard to really have faith in God.

We today take faith and make it highly personal, highly individualized. God's new thing? Well, that will be a new internal me, a new internal you. We like our God in bite sized pieces. Enough to feel some sense of meaning in life, but not too much so that our world-view gets upset. The people of Israel were very much like us in that way.

What we tend to bury our head in the sand over is that God's doesn't stop with a "new me" or a "new you." God intends to make a new world. New institutions. A new social order. Not only the radical transformation of individuals, but the overhaul of society as well. That is the "something new" Isaiah saw coming.

So, when the time was right, God sent his new thing to us: Jesus. God incarnate. Who showed us with his life that our love affair with the status quo leads only to death. That "something new" has come, and lives among us, if only we would trust it.

Chesterton put it this way: "Christianity has not been tried and found wanting; rather, it has been wanted, but never tried."

Gandhi was a bit more direct. "Oh, I don't reject your Christ", he said. "I love your Christ. It's just that so many of you Christians are so unlike your Christ!"

We cannot love the status quo and love Christ. It's oil and water. They just won't mix. Unless we water down Jesus, and make him, make God into our likeness, rather than bending ourselves to seek God's likeness.

Paul sums this up so well in his letter today to the Philippians. Paul begins by announcing that when it comes to the respected establishment figure, no one can match Paul. "If anyone has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more," he writes. "Circumcised on the eighth day" (right on time!); a member of the people of Israel (God's chosen!); as to the law, a Pharisee (the right class!); as to zeal, a persecutor of the church (politically correct!); as to righteousness under the law, blameless!

In short, no one is a better example of the solid citizen, the patriotic soul, the pillar of the community, than Paul. And yet, all this pride in who he was, all the status, all the patriotism, all the social standing. All the clubs and parties and respect from his peers, Paul has one word for all of it: He called it all rubbish.

All of it.

Because Paul has come to know this new thing that God has done. This new thing that says NO to violence, NO to personal security, NO to fear, NO to trembling, NO to guns, NO to war, NO to all our efforts to keep intact all we think we need. Because in Jesus, God demonstrates, in the cross and resurrection, that that which is Really Real is entirely at odds with our reality.

Hear Paul again: "For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ, and be found in him."

We don't get there in this life. But it isn't enough to say that because we don't get there, no use trying in this life. Paul urges us: "forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead...." This is our calling!

And this calling invites different choices, a different worldview. As you heard before, one's standpoint determines one's viewpoint. If we stand with "God, country and apple pie", we will stand with the status quo. We will continue to put our faith in arms, money and pension plans.

If we stand with Christ, we will be called fools and idiots. But we will be partners with God in this new thing that God is doing. Partners with Paul and with all the saints and martyrs.

We look out of our window into the wider world of violence, poverty, despair and anger; and too often shrug and say: Too bad, but that's life. We say: "If we're going to swim with the sharks, we better act like the sharks." But for we who claim Christ, we cannot go there.

We who claim Christ embrace a different worldview; one that rests on a faithful God; a God more powerful than death. And this is what we embrace:

Where there is no way, God makes a way. A path through the sea. A way through the wilderness. Meaning, when we think we must do all we can to make ourselves safe, God says, "safety is not the most important thing". When we say we must defend ourselves, God says, "I will defend you in ways you cannot even imagine". And that is the meaning of today's gospel lesson.

Did you see the contrast between Judas and Mary? Mary, who made a complete gift of all she had to Jesus. The expensive ointment, poured over his feet; wiped with her hair. She placed her life at his service.

And Judas, objecting to the gift; insisting the money spent would have better uses. Judas, as Barth notes, "reserves for himself the right to decide for himself, in the face of Jesus, what ... discipleship really involves. For him, [discipleship] is not an end in itself, but a means to some other end, which is perhaps not yet clear to him ... [but which causes continued] interruptions in his relationship to Jesus." CD II 2 463.

Proposing the money go to the poor is not an evil thing. It is an example though of the good being the enemy of the best. It is an example of how Judas (and isn't he so easy to relate to?) chooses to take parts of Jesus, but refuses to surrender all to Jesus. Who among us is any different?

And so we gather, to again renew our surrender to God who created all that there is. This is Isaiah today. This is Paul today. And this is the gospel.

May we receive the grace to live out our faith.

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