

God's Engine

Our three readings today lay out for us as plain as day what it means to join in God's plan for this world.

If you ever wondered what God is up to, if you ever wondered what we are supposed to be up to, well, today's readings are golden.

They unlock the door.

They are the light to our path.

They encompass, if you will, the story of God's engine.

An engine with three pistons, and the first of these begins with Peter, our thick headed saint who, like me, is so often left scratching his head at the strange ways of God.

Today, Peter has a vision.

Not a dream as much as an interruption by the sacred world into this world, an intrusion if you will, by the sacred into the profane.

And what this intrusion says to Peter is that the wall, the veil, the curtain, that separates what is sacred from what is profane no longer exists.

That just as everything in the sacred world is holy, so now, in the death and resurrection of our Lord, everything on earth is likewise holy.

Which comes as a shock to a lifelong Jew like Peter, precisely because the Jewish people were called by God, and separated out by God from

the rest of humanity, in order to show the rest of humanity how to become truly human.

The Jewish people are marked off from other people by two primary signs: the men are circumcised and the people keep kosher: certain foods are always and everywhere off limits.

These signs are their identity; to lose them is to risk losing who they are.

Which is exactly the dilemma that Peter faces today.

How do we let others in without losing who we are?

Facing the dilemma of whether these new folks can encounter God without first becoming Jewish is the earliest crisis the church faces.

Make no mistake, the vision Peter has, of the sheet being lowered with all the forbidden animals on it, the command to eat, the command that God makes all things clean, is a crisis for Peter: and it's a crisis not just about food.

By declaring all of the previously forbidden animals to be clean, God also declares that all of the previously forbidden people, are likewise, now and forever, clean.

How do we let others in without losing who we are?

The answer to that is the first piston in God's engine.

Paraphrasing Fr. James Alison:

The kingdom of God is the story of how we learn not to call anyone profane or impure.

The kingdom of God is the story in which there are, in fact, no impure or profane people.

Even people who think of themselves as disgusting learn to stop thinking that way, in the kingdom of God.

The very things we tend to reject are filled with the presence of God.

Isn't that what's happening in Peter's vision?

All kinds of foods, determined by our cultures and customs to be dirty, impure and thus untouchable are, by God's express command, good, holy and worthy of taking in.

Increase the circle to now include human beings, like those living outside our gates up and down Kanoa Lane; and what we have are people who most consider to be dirty, impure and thus untouchable.

Yet Peter's vision makes one thing unmistakable: no one is outside of God's embrace.

And therefore, no one can be outside of ours.

And so the first piston of God's engine might be called acceptance.

Acceptance of all things and all people as inherently good, inherently worthy.

But mere acceptance is not enough.

It needs to be fueled by something, and that something is the second piston in God's engine, it is love.

As Jesus begins his walk toward the cross today, it is love that he leaves with his friends, it is love that he commands his friends to live in.

But this love isn't soft or sweet or sentimental.

Nor is it limited to family, friends or insiders.

Indeed, so far reaching is this second piston of God's engine, that Jesus has the audacity to root God's love right in the middle of enemy territory!

God's love is firmly and irrevocably planted in love of the enemy.

It makes sense that God's love is grounded in loving the enemy because, as Paul repeatedly reminds us, we are, all too often, the enemies of God.

"While we were still sinners," Paul reminds us, "God sent his only Son to die for us." Rom 5:8.

And he goes on:

"He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification."

And he's still not done:

"You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly." Rom 5:6

"He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all--how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" Rom 8:32

Jesus graciously invites us to love our enemies because God loves us even though, and even when, we are enemies of God!

It is Dorothy Day, the co-founder of the Catholic Worker movement, the patron saint of our own Wallyhouse, a movement that opens homes in skid rows all over the world, who says:

“I really only love God as much as I love the person I love the least.”

What happens when I apply that standard to my faith?

The word is out that our government is evacuating embassy personnel in Iraq and preparing to send over 100,000 troops there, and one wonders what deceptions will be pulled to justify yet another Mid-East War?

One wonders whether the self-avowed Christian advisers of this president are advising him to follow Jesus, or Satan?

The ever widening circle of love, this second piston in God's engine, not only includes our enemies, but it creates this demanding standard:

Our love of God is measured by our love of our enemy.

As soon as we begin to pick and choose who we will love, we have departed from the way of Jesus.

As soon as we decide that some are deserving and others undeserving of our love, we are no longer following Jesus.

When those who claim Jesus as their Lord distinguish the saved from the damned, the elect from the doomed, the chosen from the

rejected, we are no longer followers of Jesus, we are following the Satan, the maker of this world's values and judgments and desires.

Acceptance of all people and all things, fueled by love of all people and all things, these set the stage for the third piston in God's engine, a new creation, spoken of so beautifully in the marvelous poetry of Revelation!

It was Chesterton who said that Christianity has not been tried and found wanting, Christianity has been wanted – yet rarely tried.

To be a faithful follower of Jesus, to be a bricklayer in the new creation, a laborer in its fields, means that we confront the violence of this world in a wholly new way, not with guns in our pews or ever deadlier nuclear bombs, but one that confronts brute force with soul force, as the old civil rights leaders say.

Just like Rosa Parks, the first lady of the civil rights movement, a woman who refused to give up her seat on the bus to a white man, who was arrested and jailed for this non-violent act of resistance to the violence of institutional racism.

Her witness gave courage to the hundreds of thousands who followed after her, into towns like Birmingham where young children were hit with fire hoses and attack dogs and into cities like Boston where school desegregation was met with vicious assaults on students simply seeking a decent education.

Just like 84 year old Sister Megan Rice, who "carrying a backpack and a deeply held conviction that the United States was breaking international law by quietly keeping up a multibillion-dollar nuclear weapons program, [broke into]... a high security nuclear facility in Tennessee – the largest security breach in American atomic history.

Sister Megan's non-violent anti-nuclear action included walking through a wooded hill for two hours in the dark, crawling underneath four fences that had been cut through, and avoiding patrol cars, which resulted in her being sentenced to almost three years behind bars." The Guardian, 7/16/15.

This is the kind of witness to which we as Christians are called.

Indeed, we are called to be soldiers, but soldiers who follow one "who on the cross took violence upon himself in order to conquer and embrace the enemy.

The Lamb's rule is legitimized not by the sword but by his wounds..." Volf, Exclusion and Embrace, 300.

It's why we can and must say "no" to violence, "no" to massive expenditures on arms and their ingenious methods of destruction, "no" to endless war and saber rattling.

As Christians who follow the slain lamb, it is our duty to let the government know "that the Church is not afraid of any earthly power, ..., because more are for us than can ever be against us.

A vast throng no one could ever count, from every nation and every tribe, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white and bearing palms in their hands....

We are even now, whenever we summon the courage to confront the powers of violence, joining with angels and archangels and the whole company of heaven, shouting together, "Victory to our God!" Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

This is our call as followers of the Lamb.

God's holy engine, accepting all, with love's embrace, creates a new heaven and a new earth.

There is much to do, so little time: we dare not delay, and we dare not be afraid.

For "the one who is seated on the throne says, 'See, I am making all things new!'" Rev. 21:6.

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