

St. Mark's, Niagara-on-the-Lake
The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost, year 'B'
11 July 2021 (proper 15)
The Rev'd Leighton Lee

The context of this morning's psalm is a grand liturgical and military parade, during which the psalm is sung as the Ark is being restored to the Temple. According to the writer of Hebrews, the Ark of the Covenant housed the most precious keepsakes of the nation: a golden pot containing a fragment of manna, Aaron's miraculous rod and the tablets of the covenant. It went before the Israelite army into battle as a kind of ensign and talisman, and ensured God's presence with them. After victory, it would be paraded by the Levite priests in a grand procession led by the King and accompanied by a large and joyous crowd singing songs of victory. The gods of the enemies of Israel, which are nothing more than local deities of limited power, have been vanquished by the God of Jacob, the one true god who rules over all things, and his victory is mirrored in the victory of the Israelites over their enemies.

The notion that a few artefacts could contain the very life force of God may strike us as quaint – if not downright superstitious. But we must remember that we also have ensigns and talismans of our own that we reach for when we are looking for God to come to our aid: a parent by the bedside of a desperately ill child fingers a rosary as she mumbles prayers; a nervous flyer boarding a plane wears a St. Christopher medallion around his neck to ensure a safe journey; someone in deep personal turmoil kneels in desperate adoration before the communion host displayed in a monstrance on an altar.

It's easy to dismiss all of these things, all of these practices, as nothing more than what an irreverent friend of mine calls flim-flam, folderol, and superstition without acknowledging that, when used sensibly and rationally, they have deep spiritual value. Nonetheless, it's undeniably true that for many people religious observance is not too far removed from throwing spilled salt over the left shoulder or not walking under a ladder: something done to ward off misfortune. And the Church's own ceremonial practices have actually encouraged this kind of thinking. The Church of the pre-Reformation age wanted to convey a sense of gravity and solemnity through the rituals of the mass, but all it succeeded in doing was vesting something simple with mummerly not too far removed from pagan rituals. We mustn't forget that "hocus pocus" is a pejorative corruption of the Latin words said by the priest over the bread at the time of consecration, "*Hoc est corpus meum.*"

And this is one of the reasons—one of the many reasons—why in the sixteenth century there was a Reformation, which was, in effect, a revolution, in which the Church people knew was overthrown and supplanted by something new.

The problem with revolutions, however, is that they often give birth to regimes that are worse than those which were overthrown. In his intriguing history *The Court of France 1789-1830*, Philip Mansell examines the courts of France just before the French Revolution and afterwards. He makes a strong case that the French Revolution resulted in a stronger monarchy and a larger and more elitist series of courts than had existed previously. There are, of course, other examples, such as: the tyrannical Soviet regimes which replaced the Russian Imperial Court, or present-day China.

So it was with the post-Reformation Church. What began as an attempt to purge the Church of excesses and abuses soon became an instrument of both purging and abuse. I once heard a description—not entirely untrue—of the American Pilgrims: that they escaped persecution in England so that they could be free to persecute those who did not believe as they did. But their religion was the logical outcome of the reformation, and we still live with the vestiges of such thinking. By-and-large, Christianity has become an evacuation plan or an insurance policy. This thinking is very harmful to the basic message of Christ, and has created a culture of fear, legalism, and lack of concern for social justice and restoration of *this* world.

Simon Tugwell, a Dominican scholar, once wrote,

The Church has known many different moods in the course of history ... And it is not necessarily in her 'best' moments, when she is most confident and clear, that she is most true to herself. There is a kind of unsatisfactoriness written into her very constitution, because she is only a transitional organisation, keeping people and preparing them for a new creation, in which God will be all and in all, and every tear will be wiped away. When she speaks too securely, she may obscure the fact that her essential business is with "what no eye has seen, no ear has heard, nor has it entered the heart of man.

Isn't it tragic that most people's encounter with Christianity is with an institution overly concerned with rules, regulations, and legalism? Sometimes, if they are hurting and confused enough—and there are a lot of hurting and confused people in the world today—they may accept this, at least for a while. They may even believe that in it they have found peace—and perhaps they have; I don't know. All I know is that peace has not found them.

Because true peace comes to people whose lives are wide open to the world and its struggles, which means there is room within them for abiding faith to seed itself and grow. The faith that has to be guarded, lest the light of reason blight it or the wind of doubt blow it away, is just a sickly graft, not a securely rooted plant, and only superficially does it resemble the genuine article.

The genuine article, of course, is the cross, and that of the Crucified God, which shows us that religion, and faith, and God are not to be had cheaply. It shows us that not even God can stop us from enduring the innumerable and disfiguring crucifixions of uncertainty, despair, and grief. It shows us that we're here, not to be tested as if by a

divine booby-trap, but to work for a world that does not crucify the true, the just, and the loving. To work for a world in which no one demands the heads of those whose plain speaking and honest living shed light on the double-talk and hypocrisy of these times. To work for a world that knows the divine is not captured within the artefacts of its own devising but is revealed in those who, freed from fear, anger and hatred, open their arms wide to the world, knowing that though they may lose their life, they will find God.