Devotional on Easter 5A During the Covid-19 Pandemic

Well, the themes of Easter continue to unfold as we observe and celebrate our greatest festival. The difference the Risen Christ makes in human society and practice, from the role of dialogue and hospitality to economics and politics is something the early Church recognized from the start.

Today we continue in a rather surprising way for we come to see how the Risen Christ unsettles our judgements.

For many years I practiced a kind of divided judgement about the stories in the Bible. I was quite prepared to read and understand that our forebears in the faith, especially those in the First Testament, people like Abraham, Moses, Jacob and David led, shall we say, “interesting” lives.

Whether it was their sexual adventures, their conniving or even murderous violence, the Hebrew scriptures do not spare us the details of the sordid along with the truly beautiful and ground-breaking advances as the novel idea, the novel practices of monotheism begins to take root in the Ancient Near East.

But when it came to the New Testament I practiced a different kind of judgement. Sure, I knew that the disciples “got it wrong” in their expectations and in their understanding before the climactic events of Jesus’ life but somehow I idealized all that they did after the Resurrection.

I knew of course that somehow Peter got it horribly wrong when after his amazing experience with Cornelius and his family he somehow went back to refusing to eat with uncircumcised Gentile converts to the Jesus way. Paul calls him out on it in one of his earliest letter, the letter to the Galatians when he says, “but when Cephas (original name for Peter, here used as a slur by Paul, as a way of implying ‘the man before Jesus’) came to Antioch I opposed him to his face because he stood self-condemned….”

Somehow, this one-off, called out by the Apostle to the Gentiles, did not shake my faith in the Ideal that was ***The Life of the Apostles after the Resurrection***. In my earlier life I needed an Ideal to look up to, the leaders of the New Testament were my heroes. All I could see in them was, to quote lines from our second reading, “a royal priesthood, a holy nation.”

Only later did I begin to wake up to the fact that the New Testament, in many ways as essentially Jewish as the Old Testament, written as it was, almost exclusively by Jews, is also unflinching in its accounts of mistakes and sins by the early church alongside the beauty and the ground-breaking insights of the Trinity and the New Creation.

Sometimes these mistakes are as instructive, maybe more so than the breakthroughs. Often both the breakthroughs and the mistakes require careful comparative reading in order to see them. *Probably one of the most important things I can ever say about reading the Bible is that it doesn’t present us* *with perfection, with behaviour that is without blemish, easily and seamlessly applicable to every time and place.*

To read the Bible as if it does, is to make it an idol and forget how God works with us always in the midst of our brokenness and our finite condition, even after, and maybe especially, in light of the Resurrection!

If this was just about reading scripture, you might be thinking, big deal! We’ve got bigger fish to fry in our world. And on one level you’d be right. But on another level, if we get our foundational readings mixed up we’re probably unlikely to of much use in approaching the larger issues. How does our understanding of this “new thing” that has come into our present order, the Resurrection, work it’s way out among us, so that our common life might yet matter in the wider world?

In today’s first reading, the exemplary story of Stephen’s martyrdom, the protomartyr as he’s often called we are plunged into the beauties and dangers of reading scripture.

But we are also given hope that the living Christ works in and through our mistakes and through our successes.

Stephen is one of seven original deacons, called by God through the discernment of the apostles to “feed the widows” and to witness to the Resurrection. This Stephen did with power. His ministry, his service, the Greek word *diakonos* means both. Ministry is service, service is ministry.

An important digression, ministry that doesn’t have at it’s heart a desire to serve others is mere performance or worse, attention-seeking narcissism. But—let the person who has ears hear—***all*** service that comes from a desire to serve the other is ministry to Christ and to God whether or not the person recognizes it as such!

The call put out to all people in our world today is to be deacons! To serve each other by staying apart, by considering how our actions might impact others. **We are all deacons now!**

Back to the story. Some of the leaders of the status quo understood how dangerous Stephen’s work was to their position, not only was his care of the poor showing up their selfishness, but his eloquence and wisdom was such, the earlier part of the story says, that he convinced many. Throw in works of healing and voila! You have someone who either needs to be heeded or…The leaders chose the or.

We pick up the story at the end. Stephen, in typically Jewish fashion, has been telling the story of Israel and the way it has come to its climax in the person of Jesus.

Now, make no mistake, Stephen has great courage, Stephen has a heart for ministry, but he is not infallible. Near the end of his speech he makes what I take to be a huge tactical error that basically ensures his death. Maybe he would have been martyred regardless.

He says, “you stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do.” Now, instead of identifying as one of them which he did at the beginning of his speech (he called them “brothers and fathers”), he “others” them, “*you* have become [the Righteous One’s] betrayers and murders.” “…they became enraged and ground their teeth at Stephen.”

This is so unfortunate because it’s not what Jesus did when on trial. He mostly refused to defend his position and the answers he did give only spoke of who he was. He admitted to being the Messiah, he admitted that his kingdom was not of this world, but he did not assail his accusers, he did not “other” his accusers.

Of course, this did not stop Jesus from being killed either. But it may have spared Stephen’s life *and it certainly may have spared the lives of countless others for, fatefully, many others took the protomartyr as their uncritical example.* Instead of embracing the “silence” of Jesus, they embraced the “attack mode” of Stephen.

And when we look at our present world and the history of our faith, we see that this tactic of provoking, of personal attack simply furthers religious violence.

All of us can lash out when threatened; it’s our primal instinct for survival kicking in; often, however, it furthers our difficulties. I used to think that God gave me logic so that I could out-logic others, so that I could argue other people into believing and show them the foolishness of their position but I’ve learned that when people are gnashing their teeth at me in a rage they’re not in a very good position to listen, to truly hear.

Jesus, who claims to be the way, the truth and the life, does not, at the crucial moment, argue, defend, or assail but goes silent. Last week we heard Peter’s admonition to the slaves to emulate Jesus in this as they were abused.

Now, this too can be misunderstood, this too can be twisted as a failure “tell truth to power.” This too can be misunderstood as a call for those being abused to simply “take it.” Men have tried to sell women this crock forever.

The beauty of the Risen One is that “in the moment,” he is there. In Stephen’s case, whether you follow my take and tend to think he was wrong or not in his approach, Christ reveals himself to him and Stephen is empowered to witness to Christ in the most powerful way possible, not through eloquent speech or logic, not through ensnaring attack but by extending forgiveness to those who are killing him!

And Saul, who was holding the cloaks of those killing him, was shaken to the core; later in his life when Saul, now called Paul is himself in prison he’s testifying before King Agrippa and he testifies how the living Christ had said to him when he appeared to Paul, “it hurts you to kick against the goads.”

Paul’s judgement had been seriously unsettled, not by argument, not by logic, but by forgiveness offered to him.

The difference the Risen Christ makes is not in some sort of ideal, not some pristine church, but in the way he works in and through our mistakes, not only forgiving our sins but, improbably, impossibly without his help, extending that forgiveness towards those who hurt us. Do you know this power in your life. If not, Easter is not over…Be calm, be safe, be kind is not just for others, it’s for you!