Grain and Stone

February 16th, 2020

6th Sunday after Epiphany

When the Adversary tempted the Lord in the desert (Matthew 4:1-11), he commanded Jesus to turn stones into bread. It was a practical suggestion—Jesus was hungry and had the power to make that transformation happen. One could speculate about the many reasons why Jesus should or should not have turned stones into bread; there is nothing sinful in the act itself. God is a God of miracles; it seems absolutely normal for the Son of God to likewise work miraculously. He provided bread for five thousand and then four thousand people (Mark 6:30-34, Mark 8:1-10). The temptation suggests nothing incongruent with God or His nature. Such is the subtlety of the serpent. Bread comes from the market or from the oven at home; grain comes from the fields. Both require work; both generally require the hands and labour of others. Solitary farming is possible—but it is not common for a reason. Cuthbert had a rough time trying to keep the birds away from his grain on Inner Farne. They had a bit of an argument about what the grain was to be used for. Apparently, Cuthbert later passed what are probably the oldest or earliest bird sanctuary laws. I think we know who won the argument. In drawing Jesus to the stones at hand, the Enemy wants to keep Him, and all who would follow Him, in the wilderness and away from other human beings.

In his letter to the Corinthians, the apostle Paul says: “For when one says ‘I follow Paul,’ and another, ‘I follow Apollos,’ are you not being merely human? What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth” (1 Corinthians 3:4-6). In addressing their factionalism, Paul uses an image from agriculture. One of the biggest imports to Rome was grain from Libya, Sicily and the Black Sea coasts. Paul later sails on one of those grain ships (Acts 27) that gets shipwrecked off of Malta. Most of his audience knew that grain did not come from magic. On a large *latifundia* it came from hundreds of men and women working together, each fulfilling their roles; on small farms, it came from family members and servants, cooperating and performing their functions in an orderly way. If nobody wanted to plough, it would be impossible to plant. If nobody wanted to water, then the grain would parch and die in the ground. One cannot say that farming begins and ends with just ploughing, or sowing, or watering, or weeding, or just harvesting. All of these tasks together are necessary. I was born in the rustic province of Ibaraki*.* Even as late as 2011, the prefecture contributed 25% of all of Japan’s bell peppers and Chinese cabbage. It is also famous for fermented soy beans, plums, and chestnuts. It was the birthplace of Nagatsuka Takashi, a poet who studied under Masaoka Shiki, and who wrote only one novel titled, *The Soil* (first published in 151 installments in the *Tokyo Asahi Shimbun,* 1910; English translation available from University of California Press, 1994)*.* In the opening pages of the novel, the mother is out collecting konjac roots. Then she comes home, catches a fever, and dies. It is an utter disaster for the family and the farm to lose their hardest worker and caregiver. If there is nobody to collect konjac roots, there will not be enough to eat. And that’s just the beginning of the novel, which was actually a thinly disguised memoir, or work of history. It begins by posing a devastating question. What will happen now that the pillar of the family has gone, now that one of our best agricultural workers is dead? It points out the importance of the human person for the interaction with nature that produces food. Our presence here on earth and in the church reflects a need as well. I don’t believe that there are accidental people on this earth. I believe each human being is a gift from God that gives something to our world.

Besides showing us the importance of unique and different roles, Paul draws attention to the intention of the work itself. One doesn’t sow seed just for the sake of exercising the arms. One doesn’t plough the hard earth just to walk the oxen. One doesn’t dig wells and draw water just to admire the view down below in the well. All of these things are designed and executed to create life in the fields. It is the harvest that everyone looks forward to. And the harvest, the growth, comes not from Apollos, not from Paul, not from you or me, but from God. In the Corinthian church, the workers were forgetting the meaning of what they were involved in. Paul says that their factionalism and rivalry comes from an immature understanding of spiritual reality: “But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not ready, for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way?” (1 Corinthians 3:1-3). When Paul speaks of the flesh and of merely being human, he is not criticizing our bodies nor our humanity. What he is pointing out are the limitations thereof. When we live selfishly according to the flesh, when we think only in our limited human way rather than in a spiritual or divine way, as Christ intended, we miss the whole point of what it means to have flesh and be human—we miss the significance and honor of what God has entrusted to us. In our times, we are likewise obsessed with the flesh and with being human in a way that is detrimental to our flesh and to our humanity. We are obsessed with materialist matters, methods, labels, factions and parties to the degree that we have forgotten what it really means to be human, what it means to cultivate together to produce. It is often said that the great threat to the Church is individualism. I do not believe this to be the case at all. I believe the greatest threat to the Church is to not be the Church, the body of Christ. The body of Christ is many individual members bound together by the teaching of Christ and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. When Paul describes the body as having many parts but forming one body, he reminds us of this fact: “For the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot should say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,’ that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, ‘Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,’ that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single emember, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body” (1 Corinthians 3:14-20). This is a tremendous revelation, for then and for now. To become true individual persons, we need the body; to be a body, we need true individual persons. The only way for this to work is through rising above mere flesh and humanity to embrace the higher wisdom that Paul suggests and by working together in love (cf. 1 Corinthians 13). Our word *culture* comes from the same root word as *cultivate* and also *cultus,* which is an old Latin term for religion. In writing on Christian culture, Henry Osborn Taylor notes: “Christ had set the Kingdom of Heaven above all, and men might enter even here on earth; the life absolute, eternal, is of supreme worth for men; and on earth they may receive it. But on earth the Kingdom must be entered and eternal life attained in ways of action according with the realities of human life in its earthly conditions. Christ set forth a plan for truly perfecting the earthly life… Here on earth communion with God comes through doing His will in faith and love and knowledge. Nor does Christ suggest that love’s service shall cease in the Kingdom of Heaven” (*The Emergence of Christian Culture in the West: The Classical Heritage of the Middle Ages*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1958. 34). Thus, service and cooperation are not works by which we win the kingdom of heaven. They are the very nature of the kingdom of heaven forever.

Cultivating, worshipping, and creating culture come from service; they come from a manner of living that allows freedom for people to be individuals that can cooperate together in love. Difference, and even contradiction, can be of the utmost importance. Paul cannot be Apollos and Apollos cannot be Paul. It’s a fact of existence. Both are unique; both are needed. In Aristotle’s philosophy, one of the most important concepts or laws is the law of non-contradiction. A loaf of bread cannot be both a loaf of bread and not a loaf of bread. A stone cannot be both a stone and not a stone. The apostle cannot be an apostle and not an apostle. As it says in *The Metaphysics*: “It is impossible for the same thing to belong and not to belong at the same time to the same thing and in the same respect” (as quoted in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* s.v. Aristole on Non-Contradiction). In the first volume of his book, *God: His Existence and Nature,* Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P. wrote: “Aristotle gives eight principle reasons for defending the necessity and real validity of the principle of contradiction. They are briefly: 1. To deny this necessity and this validity would be to deprive words of their fixed meaning and to render speech useless; 2. All idea of the reality of an essence, or thing or substance as such, would have to be abandoned; there would be only a becoming without anything which is on the way of becoming; it would be like saying that there can be a flux without a fluid, a flight without a bird, a dream without a dreamer; 3. There would no longer be any distinction between things, between a galley, a wall, and man;, 4. It would be destroy all thought, even all opinion; for its very affirmation would be a negation; 5. It would mean the destruction of all desire and all hatred; there would be only absolute indifference; for there would be no distinction between good and evil; there would be no reason why we should act; 7. It would no longer be possible to distinguish degrees of error; everything would be equally false and true at the same time; 8. It would put an end to the very notion of becoming; between the beginning and the end of movement; the first would already be the second, and any transition from one state to another would be impossible. Moreover, ‘becoming’ could not be explained by any of the four causes. There would be no subject of becoming; the process would be without any efficient or final cause, and without specification, and it would be both attraction and repulsion, concretion as well as fusion.” Thus, any theology, philosophy, government or system of thought that would seek to make us all into Apollos, or all into Paul, or judge Apollos just because he is Apollos, or Paul just because he is Paul, or say that Paul is Apollos or Apollos is Paul—is meaningless. What unites them in their differences is their oneness in Christ through the Holy Spirit and the gospel of God. One cannot just pour water and grow grain. One cannot just plough and plough and plough and hope for the wheat to rise. One plants, another waters, God gives the increase.

God gives the increase. This raises some questions. What kind of harvest are we expecting? What kind of grain does the gospel sow? What kind of harvest is the kingdom of heaven? It will be Lent soon, the time of fasting and preparing for Easter—a good time to think about the grain of wheat that went into the earth and died so that life could sprout forth, a good time to meditate on those questions. As Jesus said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him” (John 12:24-26). Unless the grain of wheat dies, it remains alone. Unless we die to our selfishness, we remain alone, cut off from each other and cut off from the grain and bread that comes from life together in the Spirit. When the Adversary tempted Jesus to turn bread into stones, he belied his complete ignorance of what the coming kingdom is going to be. The only thing he knows is power, convenience, selfishness, destruction, and turning away. Jesus is hungry and needs bread. Bread comes from the fields and markets where people dwell, sometimes fighting with each other, but very often working together, for better or for worse, in sickness and in health. The Adversary cannot let Jesus go back to the people, to take on their lives, to live with them and help them, or—God forbid—speak to them and teach them something. Jesus must turn stones into bread. Jesus must remain alone, cut off from responsibility towards himself and towards others. Jesus must not play his part and serve others or God. Naturally, Jesus had a longer view, a greater prospect, a vision that utterly terrifies the Enemy, just as it terrifies anyone who believes in real freedom. Jesus can only do what the father teaches and gives him to do, and thus he says: “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4). And the Lord would tell his disciples: “I have food to eat that you do not know about…My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work” (John 4:32-34). One simple fact of his life was that Jesus was called to be Jesus, and be who he is before God, and follow what God had required of him. That is a mystery to the Devil. It is a mystery to us most days, too, because it is radical and simple and quite difficult. God has not called you to be Apollos or Paul, and not even a follower of one or the other. God has called you to be only you, a follower of Jesus. The only way that works is when we do it, and let others do it, and work through it together. The only way it works is when we remember that without God, we can do nothing at all, and that the glorious work entrusted to us, belongs to God: “So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor. For we are God’s fellow workers. You are God’s field, God’s building” (1 Corinthians 3:7-9).

Benediction

Go now, and live as one body in Christ.

Be at peace, and care for one another;

Suffer with one another and rejoice with one another.

Give your attention to the Word of God

And proclaim the good news of freedom to all.

And may God delight your heart and sharpen your vision;

May Christ Jesus keep you, thought and word, in his grace;

And may the Holy Spirit be the fountain that sustains you all

And binds you together as one.

Amen.