

Lent 5, Year C
Philippians 3:4b-14
March 21, 2010

I feel the need to leave off my usual consideration of the Gospel passage and this morning think instead about the extraordinary words we have just heard from St. Paul in his letter to the Philippians. In these few sentences Paul turns many of our ordinary ideas about what makes Christianity attractive upside down, and in the process offers us a perspective on life itself that all of us, no matter how unlike Paul we might be, need to consider.

I cannot count the number of times I have heard people say that Christianity is the answer to a deep spiritual longing or hunger that is rife in the world today. All sorts of evidence for this hunger gets cited. The rise of eastern spirituality in the west, the growth of Islam in America, and the attraction of various sorts of what have historically been considered off beat religions or spiritual perspectives have fueled this idea that the problem today is that people are spiritually hungry, and because conventional institutional religion is no longer feeding them people are turning to these alternatives. Our task therefore is to reframe our religion in a way that does satisfy this emptiness, this hunger.

We have all also heard it said many, many times, that Christianity is the answer to that burden of self doubt and inadequacy that so many people carry with them. We do try to be good, and yet we can't quite carry it off. How

wonderful it is then to know that our sins are forgiven, and that we are accepted by the God who has considered us in every regard and yet is willing to take us in, unworthy though we be. Moreover this is very good news for those who are not yet Christian; they too, they especially, need to know what we know, that we are all forgiven and all accepted if only we turn to God in Christ for the kind of comfort we all so desperately need, even if we are not at the conscious level aware of that need.

These are by far the two most common means of making an appeal for the value of becoming and remaining Christian I have heard during my lifetime. For those of us who are Christian they remain important aspects of our faith. Many of us are indeed like John Donne; we ask that question of our lord: “wilt thou forgive those sins through which I run, and do run still though still I do deplore.” And we are truly comforted and inspired by the redemptive answer given to us by Christ’s love which “shall shine as he shines now, and heretofore.” Knowing that, many of us join Donne – though without the benefit of the play on words his name offers – declaring with grateful hearts; “And having done that, thou hast done, I fear no more.”

Yet, it isn’t quite working on the larger scale. Regardless of the anecdotal success of a few very large independent bible churches, religion in general and Christianity in particular is continuing a slow decline in the West. Today there are in the USA not just fewer people who claim to be Christian than there were a decade ago, but fewer people who claim any religious affiliation at all, and this in

spite of the explosion of choices people have for filling that emptiness, feeding that hunger.

I suspect very strongly that this might be because we just might possibly have it wrong, at least for this era. People might not be as spiritually hungry as we are told. Though the vast majority of us are not scientists, the overall scientific worldview that affects all of us profoundly just might anchor people in their own self understanding sufficiently to provide some grasp of their lives. Though all of us spend time feeling bad about who we are and what we have done, modern psychology just might provide both an adequate explanation for and way through that sense of guilt and shame that inevitably afflicts people from time to time. Most simply put, the Western world just might, on the whole, be much more spiritually satisfied than we imagine. I am not saying I know this, but I am saying it is a question worth asking, an issue worth probing far more deeply than we as Christians have to this point.

To the extent that the western world is more spiritually satisfied than we have imagined this is exactly where Paul comes in, and especially the side of Paul we see in this passage from Philippians. For Paul was not spiritually seeking when he was converted. He was not experiencing an emptiness or unresolved sense of inadequacy and unworthiness. On the contrary, he was by his own assessment a perfect Jew and a perfectly contented Jew. Listen again to what he has to say: "If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the

tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of the Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; (both good things in his pre-Christian perspective, by the way) as to righteousness under the law, blameless." Here in miniature is the spiritual autobiography of a fully contented, self confident man, assured of his own place and value within the religious world he inhabited. His religion answered all his questions, and resolved all his doubts. He knew he was forgiven, he knew he was loved.

And yet, he threw it all away, declared it in fact to be *rubbish* for the sake of what he discovered in Christ. This is what we need to notice about Paul, and what he has to say to this era. Here is a man who abandoned the security that emerges from what we can know about ourselves and our world. Here is a man who gave up the sense of contentment that derived from what he himself could accomplish. Here is man who gave over completely the self understanding that arises from human efforts at gaining mastery of themselves for the sake of receiving life not as something he has earned, but as gift, freely given, unconditionally granted. He is, to return to the subject of last week's sermon, the elder brother, broken down at last not by any sense of hunger or inadequacy, but by the father's love, now leaving the farm himself to go out into the world in search of all those other elder brothers convinced that what we are arises from what we do. Paul abandoned the security that comes from self for the sake of life seen as gift, freely given, never earned. Bracket please the "Damascus Road" experiences related three times in Acts, an event that Paul himself never

mentions in any of his letters, even when most pressed by those who want to know where he got his credentials. What we know from Paul himself is that he became a Christian not because he was insecure, he accepted insecurity because he became a Christian. Paul accepted Jesus not because he felt sinful, he began to understand the deeper nature of sin because he accepted Jesus.

Here, to me at least, is a message for the modern western world. It does no good to tell people they are spiritually hungry when they are not experiencing hunger. It does no good to tell people they are sinful and need forgiveness when they have no sense that this is true. It just might do some good to begin to say that the whole world created by the world view which arises from the human sense of self sufficiency is crumbling before our very eyes. It might do some good to point out to people that the sense of security bestowed upon us by what we can do and control neither overcomes our own mortality and finitude nor does it actually make us secure as we live out our lives. It might do some good to draw a direct line between the crumbling of financial markets, and what happens when people begin to treat each other as targets and opportunities for increasing personal wealth, power or prestige. It might do some good, in other words, to stop telling people that Christianity is a way *into* security and peace, and begin to tell them the truth, at least the truth for this era of human development, that Christianity is a way *out of* the kind of security we have built for ourselves into a new way of living that abandons this very security for the sake of entering into life that sees other humans not as problems or possibilities,

but as gift and sign of a love unknown. It might do some good, in other words, to tell people that the human problem is not that we don't have enough control; rather, the human problem is that in a real sense we claim too much control.

Of all the writers whose words are recorded in the pages of the New Testament St. Paul is the clearest exponent of this reason to become Christian. It is his voice that I have found most compelling, I make no pretense otherwise. It is his voice too that I believe would be most compelling to millions of others who simply can't relate either to the notion of spiritual hunger or to a subjective feeling of inadequacy rooted in a sense of personal sin. If we can but free him to speak as he himself spoke, and not interpret him through the lens of our own certainties about what others must be experiencing, he may yet become as great an evangelist for the 21st century, as he was for the first.