

B Trinity Sunday
7 June 2009
RCL

Living According To The Spirit

Sometimes the language of the Bible obscures the Word of God. Paradoxical, isn't it? The Word of God is, of course, Jesus Christ – His person, His message, His intent for the world. This Word of God is no simpleton. He is at the least a very complex human being who saw clearly into the meaning and power of God's mystery. Christians, of course, see Him as much more, a unique focusing of Divinity into creation, into a human life. If poets and novelists show us that a merely human life is mysterious, taking huge numbers of words or startling images to reveal, how much more the complexity of a human life bound up intimately with the Divine Life. The wonder of the gospels and other books of the New Testament is that they are so spare. Each of these twenty-seven books is short compared to the matters which they address. I've just bought a 944 page history of World War II, just six years of calamitous struggle. Comparatively, the New Testament books are almost literary skeletons, giving form and magnitude to their content, but leaving so much unsaid, unpainted, unexpressed. It is left to us to put flesh on that skeleton, to give it life with a Spirit that we see leading us beyond what is here-and-now.

In addition to the mysterious nature of its subject matter, the Bible must work against forms of language that are two to three thousand years old and from radically different societies, societies in which the seemingly obvious realities bear very different meanings from ours. Family, fidelity, future, life, love, lord, God, glory, salvation, and many others – when translated from their original can carry a different meaning for us than for the original hearers of the good news. Similar, yes, recognizable, of course, but imbedded in a cultural milieu that makes them work differently. Just think, for a modern example, of the different ways that “family” functions in America as compared to a Middle Eastern nation or an African nation.

Some words that are easy to misconstrue in biblical literature are world, name, grace, church, family, purity, foreigner, spirit. This meditation is not a chapter in New Testament dictionary-making, so we won't talk about all these words, but it is a caution to be aware, when we approach our revelatory scriptures, that we are treading on ground that can shift. Sometimes God is even there in the shifting ground, leading us onto terrain whose existence we had never guessed.

I would like to spend some time on one word, though, because it is so central to understanding today's reading from *Romans*. That word is flesh. Such is our own cultural milieu that when we hear “flesh” we almost always hear “sex”, maybe, if we are reflective, with a hint of gluttony, drunkenness, sloth – but mostly sex. So when Paul writes that we will die if we live according to the flesh, we almost always hear a warning against sexual immorality. Paul meant that, of course, but he meant so much more, and that “so much more” can be very helpful for our modern spiritual lives.

When Paul uses this term, he is talking about the purely natural. The flesh is a world without God, without a permanent future, without a destiny. Flesh is a world confined to the present, confined to the accidental, come into existence through no plan or intention, having no meaning beyond what we construct for ourselves, ending in the cold indifference of a universe run down, whose history and meaning die with the last flicker of the last sun in the last galaxy. This is Paul's flesh, an immensely greater meaning that we moderns put on that word.

The saint who saw so much of the world in service to the God whom he served puts before us an alternative, what he calls the world of the spirit. As you might guess, this is a world of a different sort, because the spirit Paul speaks of is the Spirit of God, the Jewish God of immateriality, omnipresence, omniscience, purpose, passion, compassion, altruism, care, love. Paul saw this God through the lens of Jesus Christ, this mysterious Power of Divinity that is focused in a detectable sense in the space-time of ancient Judea and Galilee. What Paul grasped is that this focus of Divinity is now present throughout all space and time; it is Spirit unconstrained by the limits that keep you and me in our place. The world of Spirit honors the natural world but goes beyond it, says there is more, posits an eternity of life and love that gives immense meaning to every intent and action, says that the universe is no accident but is planned and accompanied by its Creator, that meaning is not what we make for ourselves but what we discover in the eternal, compassionate changelessness of God. Our destiny is to outlast the last flicker of life in the universe. For some people, it seems too good to be true. But not for the Christian, whose conviction is based on an experience of immense, incomprehensible love made present in the human-divine life of Jesus of Nazareth mediated through a universal Presence of God that we name Spirit.

(This little meditation, by the way, is not a screed against atheism. Some atheism is a selfish escape from accountability or an angry, justified rebellion against a conception of God formed by a childhood religion of coercion, abuse, and exploitation. But some atheists are thoughtful, ethical folk who do not see a God in the universe but who nonetheless live their lives according to the best light of their understanding of a good human life. I think Christians and atheists can make common cause. I just grieve that, when atheists give a cup of water or a plate of food, they see only the momentary satisfaction of need and not an expression of love that reaches beyond the stars and lasts into eternity.)

So, what does this mean for you and me? Something that we probably already know:

- + that we are visited people, a haunted people, if you will;
- + that we are haunted and hounded by the Spirit of God;
- + that God will not rest until the last recorded syllable of time knits all of creation into the new thing that God is doing through His Spirit in Jesus Christ;
- + that God's Spirit lives in Jesus and lives in us;
- + that what we do has immense and eternal consequences; the cup of water slakes temporary thirst and gives eternal hope as well as unbounded love;
- + that it is all right to be a fool for God, that sacrifice makes sense;

- + that we have a duty and responsibility to proclaim this message of spiritual life and love to a world that is desperately hungry for meaning and purpose;
- + that we have help, strength, and comfort in the Spirit of God given to the whole world by Jesus Christ.

Let us live, not according to the flesh, for that is not good enough for us. Let us live according to the Spirit, God's Spirit. May we all be as spiritual as God intends us to be. Amen.