

“The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.” (Phil. 4:7)

I would like to begin this afternoon the question of why the Christian religion appears not to work.

Consider this letter I received recently from one of our graduates at Berkeley Divinity School, who has just decided to leave the parish where he served as rector. Giving the reasons for his resignation, he writes:

The atmosphere is mean spirited and lacking in compassion. Much is changing here, racially, economically, and ethnically. Instead of embracing these changes, fear is the overwhelming motivating factor. They never really have uncovered the dirt and dysfunction that has accrued over a long period of time, and which is now woven into the very fabric of the parish.

So why is it, I ask, that the Christian religion appears not to work? No doubt the people of this parish have faithfully said their prayers, attended church, worked hard on good causes—they are not, in other words, so very different from any of the rest of us. And yet somehow in the end, the fruit of all that church life is a mean spirit utterly lacking in courage.

Looking across the span of Christian history, one would have to admit that the overall record of the church looks to be no better. Just think of the variety of words attached to the Christian religion that speak of a similarly malevolent spirit: pogrom, inquisition, crusade, schism, anathema, excommunication—and, the latest favorite from the Anglican playbook, impaired communion. For a church that claims its mission is “to restore all people to unity with God and with each other,” we Episcopalians don’t have a lot to show for our efforts right now.

So, I repeat, why is it that the Christian religion appears not to work?

Why, when we come together day by day and week by week to celebrate a new life in Christ, do we ultimately seem to be so untouched by the contours of that life? Why are the cynics and skeptics so well equipped with the evidence that church-going people are on average no better than anyone else—and that often the more principled and enlightened people are in fact those who will have nothing to do with organized religion (although, personally, I have yet to see a religion that is organized)? We might even ask whether all of this afternoon’s pomp and circumstance (what Garrison Keillor once described as pageantry sufficient to please Florentine princes!) will ultimately leave us essentially untouched?

Most pastors, of course, *can* tell tales of remarkable transformations that *do* occur in people’s lives as they discover Christian faith. And in every congregation there *are* extraordinary examples of saintly individuals whose lives of prayer and service stand apart. But even we church people tend to view those saintly individuals as the exception rather than the rule, don’t we? The official church hierarchy is instinctively suspicious when anyone is acclaimed a saint, and has put in place a well defined procedure for ferreting out imposters. Saintliness, it seems, is not to be expected in the church.

So where does that leave us? Have all our preaching and faith, as Paul asks, been in vain? Or ... might we be asking the wrong question? Could it be, that the key issue of Christian faith is not whether it can make us good, but rather whether it can help us to deal with that part of us which is not? For the truth is—and here is the hard reality—that there is enough bad even in the best of us, that we desperately need a way to make sense of that dark side and to know what to do with it. We are, in fact, all more human than otherwise.

And this is where ordination enters in. If the Christian religion is not in the first instance a matter of making us good, but of dealing with the fact that we often are not, then we are brought firmly and decisively to the foot of the cross, that place where we

can look honestly at the consequences of who we are, but, at the same time look expectantly for the promises of hope. Alfred, by ordaining you a priest, we as a church are asking you to lead us to that place, and to stand with us at the foot of the cross where though everything may seem lost, yet no one *is* lost. We are asking you to abide with us there, where though we must have an absolute and sobering realism about who we are and what we do, yet we are also given the unexpected and unqualified discovery of grace in the words, “Father, forgive.” The very architecture of this church speaks powerfully of this great reversal, gathered as we are beneath that dominating reredos which holds before us the crucified yet forgiving Jesus. As “pastor, priest and teacher,” Alfred, we are asking you to keep us in its shadow.

For only here, perhaps, do we find a response to the question of whether Christian faith can work: only at the foot of the cross, where the question of our being good is overtaken by God’s disclosure of our being forgiven, does the church find its true vocation. You see, the church does not succeed by making us good (if by good we mean virtuous), but rather by making us holy—that is to say, forgiven, restored, redeemed. Through the ministry of word and sacrament, priesthood gives focus to this disclosure of restoration, and so leads us toward finding in the cross a “love so amazing, so divine, [it] demands my soul, my life, my all.” Priesthood, like the church, takes its meaning and purpose from nothing other than abiding “beneath the cross of Jesus,” where, as that old hymn puts it, “from my smitten heart with tears, two wonders I confess: the wonders of redeeming love and our unworthiness.” Only as it is gathered at the foot of the cross does the church show itself to be “that wonderful and sacred mystery,” as our collect put it, where “things that were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new.”

Of course, this is not an easy place for a priest for to be. Literature is full of haunting examples of clergy who have struggled with its trials. From George Bernanos’ young curé in *The Diary of a Country Priest*, to Graham Greene’s whiskey priest in *The Power*

and the Glory, to the Reverend T. Lawrence Shannon in Tennessee Williams’ *Night of the Iguana*, the frustrations of balancing the hope and anguish of the cross have variously overwhelmed or sustained these tormented figures. The challenge—not just for clergy, but for the whole church—is to sustain the honest realism occasioned by the fact of Christ’s death, while at the same time holding on to the genuine hope occasioned by his words of forgiveness. Without such a penitent hopefulness, we risk lapsing either into a bitter cynicism, or a bellicose self-righteousness, neither of which holds much of the gospel. The cross confronts us, before it consoles us—think of how our psalmist sang, “you have searched me out and known me, O Lord”—and Christianity is a religion of confrontation, before it is a religion of consolation.

Only from that perspective does the Christian religion reach a place where it might be said to work: poised beneath the cross of Jesus, it can be open, honest, and repentant; yet it can also be hopeful, expectant, and courageous. And when we have entered in to the mystery of that place, where “such love and sorrow meet,” then shall we know what today’s lesson promised us as “the peace of God, that surpasses all understanding, which shall keep our hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God.” Amen.

Sermon by The Very Revd. Joseph Britton
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