

Easter 5, April 29th, 2018

Acts 8:26-40, Psalm 22:25-31 1 John 4:7-21, John 15: 1-8

Easter Faith: Defensive or Engaging?

Introduction

In my experience, the one great recurring feature of the human condition is that we claim too much for ourselves: we claim too much for ourselves as individuals and as groups: in a sense we are all potential narcissists. In my experience, working across cultures, languages and creeds, we human beings have a capacity to turn wonderful ideas, majestic insights, into weapons. The most sublime of perceptions we are prone to abuse, hurting others and isolating ourselves. In fact, the more beautiful the idea, the more resplendent the concept, the more likely its misuse. What I am saying then, echoing the insight of Gabriel Daly, from our quotes of modern Christians, is that what matters is not just *what* we think, but *how* we think it: how we interpret our Faith Ideas, experiment with new Faith Ideas, and ultimately how we put these Faith Ideas into practice in the real world.

I want to first ground our thinking in the Gospel for the day (John 15:1-8) and then apply those insights to today, to our current context, our current experience.

The Gospel

The Gospel reading is one of the most beautiful in what is arguably, the most beautiful Gospel of the New Testament– the Gospel of John. In it, we hear of the marvel of the relationship between God and human beings made possible through Jesus Christ. In it, we hear of the way in which we as believers, are immersed as branches in God the Gardener through Christ the vine: *“Remain united to me, and I will remain united to you. A branch cannot bear fruit by itself; it can do so only if it remains in the vine. In the same way you cannot bear fruit unless you remain in me”*. The word constantly accessed in describing this depth and wonder of relationship Christians have with God through Christ, is “remain or dwell” It reflects a depth and ongoing-ness. But moreover, it suggests that such intimacy of relationship that we have with God through Christ, results in ethics – in self-giving love, in a sort of self-emptying for others.

How can we sum up John’s thought? It is higher, more sublime than anything offered to us through the Gospels of Mark, Matthew or Luke. In John’s poetic faith, Jesus does not just point us to the Kingdom of God, Jesus *is* the Kingdom of God.

And yet...and yet, what sort of community do you think would develop this sort of sublime, imaginative theology...*“I am the vine, you are branches”*? You might expect, a sublime community, a community creatively living out the ethics it proclaims. But...you would be wrong. John’s community, the source of the most beautiful of Christian theologies, is a “basket case”. What the biblical historians have uncovered in their research, is that John’s community ultimately self-destructed, torn by factionalism, quarrels, discord and animosity. The most sublime, awe-inspiring, exalted theology became the very tool for dissension and disagreement. It was as if, the ‘better the theology’, the more license people felt to dominate others, to assert their faith superiority, their power. But not only did the community of John self-destruct, it also fell out with those outside it: the Jewish communities in the synagogues, objectified as “children of the devil”, as well as those who chose not to be converted – accusing them of “belonging to the world”, of “worldliness”.

What can we say then? Surely, what this community thought, the content of its faith understanding, the substance of its theology was breath-taking. But *how* they thought it, *how* they interpreted it, *how* they used it: as license for conflict and ultimately their own isolation and destruction, is a lesson in faith itself.

Today

Easter Faith then, I think, is about the beauty of Christ. John's theology captured that so well, as does much contemporary Christian thought. But...theology is more than just thought, about *what* we think, about content. Theology, Christian theology in particular, is about *how* we think, *how* we interpret God and Christ in a changing world, *how* we put God and Christ into action, building models for love and justice, for love and mutuality between real people

Today, we live in difficult times: we are experiencing the breakdown of our institutions: political, economic, and social. Instead of maintaining and building consensus – the life thread of democracies – we are increasingly at each other's throats. Our ideas are fraying at the edges and are unable to sustain us together. At heart however, the issue is a very concrete, organic one: a breakdown in our connectedness as human beings, a breakdown in our communities.

Now the Christian Church is part and parcel of this broader problem. The Church, as many institutions, is weaker than it used to be. Secularism is more militant and more self-assured. In this situation, the tendency of many Christians today, is to do what John's community did: *fall back* on the 'beauty' of what we believe, shout it more loudly and more defensively, as we feel increasingly cornered, as we retreat. From a human point of view, that is understandable but it is not enough. In fact it is ultimately destructive. To simply repeat the Faith in times of stressed change is to become little more than an island – disconnected from the broader reality. The sublimeness of the content of our theology is no substitute for interpreting the Faith, so it may genuinely engage with, be of practical service to a changing, vulnerable world.

Gabriel Daly is right. It is not just about *what* we think, but *how* we think it; how we put Easter Faith into practice in the real world, thinking in new ways and experimenting in what we do: our practice. Easter Faith: defensive or engaging? Let's be engaging!