

Sunday, July 7th, 2019, Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

Readings: 2 Kings 5:1-17, Psalm 30, Galatians 6:10-18, Luke 10: 1-11, 16-20

On Giant's Shoulders: Doing First, Thinking Second

Introduction

The Hebrews were always activists, *truth* was located in events, in happenings, in actions. That much is clear as we read the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament – the Exodus, the building of a new homeland, the establishment of the law, and within the law, the priority for a society of justice for the poor. For the Hebrews you *do the truth*. The Greeks, on the other hand – which became the foundation for us in the West – were always thinkers. For them, truth was located in thought, in ideas: Plato, Aristotle, and above all Socrates, to name just a few. For the Greeks you *think the truth*. The Christian Church is the product of these two ways of being that were so different: one, Hebrew, activist, the other, Greek, reflective. My own experience – as you might expect – has included these dual dimensions: the commitment to truth located in actions and truth located in ideas. But, if you were to press me on the issue, I would say without a moment's hesitation, that truth is above all located in events, in actions, in what is done in the world, in particular in what we do as human beings, as Christians in the world. A simple way of putting this is the saying, "actions speak louder than words": and so, they do. But there is another way of putting it as well, which is a bit more subtle, and I think more accurate, more philosophically inclined: and it is found in the word *praxis*. What *praxis* means is the relationship between action and thought. We begin with acting, doing in the world, and then reflect more deeply about it – thinking in the world – and then we act again. There is then a vital relationship between acting and thinking, but the idea of *praxis* is that the priority is always in the acting, the doing. In other words, our thinking serves to make our actions, our doing, more effective, more cutting-edge.

With this observation that action and thinking are related but that actions have a priority, let's turn to the readings for today.

The Readings

Let us begin with the story of General Namaan. Here is an accomplished, sophisticated, successful, well-connected Aramean – not a Jew – who understands the way the world works, and has used it to his advantage. When a simple Hebrew slave-girl in his household tells him how he can finally become cured of the one condition over which he has had no control in his life – the much feared affliction of leprosy – he initially goes about it in the ways that have always worked so successfully in the past, but fail him now. He recurs to his traditional ways of thinking, but finally, after much "hoo and haa", attempting to secure his sense-of-entitlement – the curse of the political class, then and now – he follows the deft, simple, sensible, sagacious directions of Yahweh's prophet, Elisha... and is cured. The usual levers of power and thought are not successful, but a basic, direct *act* of faith is!

To Paul – no mean thinker of his time – he rips into the churches in Galatia, who are arguing only the ways church people can, over seemingly preeminent, 'dire' questions, as they refuse to cooperate with each other. To them, 'tearing his hair out', he insists "the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ," is the thing that matters, the thing that relativises all your doctrinal claims and conflicts. He adds, the only thing you should be concentrated on is to "work for the good of all."

And finally, to the Gospel: Luke's usual no-nonsense approach: as the 70 are sent out, the task is simple: "cure the sick."

Application

What can we say about this Biblical priority for action over thought, in a world, and in the Christian church that are increasingly tribalized, torn apart by "identity politics".

Ludwig Wittgenstein – one of the West's pre-eminent philosophers and thinkers, this guy – to whom I have referred before, and who taught at Cambridge for decades – concluded that in the West we have become seduced ("bewitched") by the elixir of words and concepts, that we privilege abstraction over reality, words over actions. Wittgenstein himself, wrote in his little book, *Culture and Value*: "The point is that sound" Christian "doctrine need not take *hold* of you; you can follow it as you would a doctor's prescription, but you need more: something to move you and turn you in a new direction". Wittgenstein

does not say that “doctrine” does not matter, it’s just not to let it become an obsession, that obliterates real, actual results in real, specific people, including ourselves. Doctrine is helpful as a guide, but it is not a substitute for intuitive creative, Spirit-led action, that gets the results biblical stories always prioritize— healing, relief, justice, and care.

In today’s gospel, Jesus gave one, simple directive: “Cure the sick. Actions matter most, because that is when and where “the Kingdom is near.”