

11th Sunday 2015 2 Corinthians 5:10

The second reading says: "We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense, according to what he did in the body, whether good or evil." Could there be more unappealing, less uplifting words in today's readings? Could there be a passage less likely to be expounded on in homilies around the world this morning? Yet the theme threads through all the readings. In Ezekiel God brings down the high and raises what is low. Even if the arc of history bends toward justice, this won't happen in our lifetimes. Jesus tells the parable of the seed growing. First the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. Then the crop is ready for the sickle of harvest. An ancient perversion of this theme makes this a threat. Authority figures through the ages have used it to keep those under them in line. The sickle helps personify death as the grim reaper. Can any of this material be used creatively, to make constructive sense in our age?

It relates to a nostalgic moment for me. I will share it despite its self-referential qualities. It has a point but will take a while to get there. In June 2002 I was invited to preach at a special service in England (I was already there.) It was the 125th anniversary of the Anglican diocese of St Albans. A friend from the Anglican church in Bedford wangled the invitation for me. Bedford is at the geographic center of England, and St Paul's is at the center of the town. There has been a church there for a thousand years. It is an ordinary parish church, but to us it would look like a small cathedral. Naturally I said yes, though it meant extra work during vacation. I cobbled together a message on St Alban, the first martyr in Britain, a Roman soldier who died for his Christian friend.

It was a bright morning; the sun poured through the windows; there was to be a parish picnic afterwards. The music was fabulous. At the end, we sang a St Alban song, to the music of the Battle Hymn of the Republic. Glory, glory, hallelujah, his truth is marching on. The people beamed at me, their token American, as they belted it out. It felt like the Super Bowl but I was a little embarrassed. American Christians would cringe at such a degree of naked patriotism in church.

My homily was unmemorable but this was insignificant. The crystallizing moment was just before I began to speak. My podium was a medieval pulpit, carved in stone, very high. So during the Alleluia, I climbed the spiral stone stair. I thought of the apostles going up the mount of transfiguration, or Moses ascending Mount Nebo. At the top I had a wonderful view. The sun

streaming down, the people smiling up, the slight expectant pause. It was a little bit of heaven, the beauty, the connection.

It was not any antique pulpit. On March 10, 1758, almost 250 years before, the great itinerant evangelist John Wesley stood in it to preach a sermon. It is estimated that in fifty years he rode 250,000 miles on horseback and gave 40,000 sermons; his brother Charles wrote 5,000 elegant hymns, some of which we sing today. Overachievers. But their sermons and songs warmed people's hearts at a time when the institutional church seemed cold and dead. Wesley's approach compares to the Catholic discovery of the sacred heart, which we celebrated the other day. Both emphasized the importance of feeling, over the cerebral, in the spiritual life. Wesley's audience was the poor and marginalized, to whom he donated all his preaching fees. So I felt humble when I got to the top, standing where he stood. This had to be the high point of my career. But my entertaining little reflection would not compare with the profound gravity of his sermon.

On that March morning he spoke on the text we heard in the second reading. "We shall all appear before the judgment seat of Christ." I wonder what he said. I daresay it was quite different from what he'd say today. But today it would be something rather than nothing, and I don't think it would be threatening. It would invite people to love the Lord.

The best I can do is to connect judgment to the themes of connection and meaningfulness. When I reached the summit of that pulpit I felt connected in all sorts of ways. To God's sunlight, to those expectant Britishers gazing up at me, to my homeland and its history by the Glory-Hallelujahs, to the grassy slope not far away where a Roman soldier named Alban was beheaded to protect his friend. And to John Wesley in that Quaker hat and gloomy frock-coat. With a saddle-sore behind and gentle face. Maybe humming his brother's hymn "Love divine, all loves excelling."

The etymology of the word religion relates to binding or connecting. *Re-ligare* is the intensive of bind fast or join. The words, "rely" and "ligament" also come from the Latin by this route. So if we connect to the past as well as the present, if we bind fast to people who are different from us as well as the congenial, if we join our earthly selves to the heavenly--we are "getting religion."

The quality of meaningfulness is important in a world where so much is reduced and trivialized. To put in meaning where it might be trampled down is our way of combatting

punitive judgment. It reminds us that what we do is important. Yes, there is a lot in our lives that is routine and even mechanized. So it is important to hold on to what enlarges and is precious.

I often think of that tube of light described by those who come back after post-death experiences. All the events of their lives flashed before them in an instant, but not in a hostile or accusing way. Perhaps we can prepare ourselves in advance so that moment will be particularly meaningful and connective. I hope I have cultivated enough mindfulness that I will see good things in that “judgment movie” of my life. I hope to see the faces of those I’ve loved, and to view the key-moments in which I felt most connected. I hope to revisit moments when I was connected to John Wesley, the parishioners of St Paul’s Bedford, and to all of you.

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