

Now, your quiz for today. We just sang a hymn which starts out about Abraham, but rapidly picks up imagery from another spot in the Bible. (*Hymnal 1982, #401, The God of Abraham praise*) Does anyone know where that other spot is? Where in the Bible do you find people crying, “Holy, Holy, Holy, almighty King, who was and is and is to come?”

Response: Revelation

Exactly, it’s the *Song of Heavenly Worship* from the fourth chapter of Revelation. Episcopalians tend to be uncomfortable with the Book of Revelation. But some of our favorite hymns are full of imagery from it -- *Alleluia, sing to Jesus (Hymnal 1982, #460,461)* is a good example. Casting crowns across the crystal sea is unvarnished Book of Revelation. So time and again this book, which we might not be caught dead reading because it’s associated with people we find so peculiar, shows up in our hymns. I thought I’d tag that for further consideration. There’s a little glitch in our behavior here: what we reject we gladly accept in a different format. We wouldn’t be human without such things, but we’d be less than human if we didn’t recognize them in ourselves. OK.

In some ways, it’s appropriate. If you want to talk about the triumph of God over sin and death, that is what the Book of Revelation is about. You may dismiss, or at least I’d recommend such dismissal, from your minds of any belief that the Book of Revelation is really about the end of the world or is an ancient version of a disaster movie. No, it’s really about the relation of God to the fact of sin and death in human existence and what we are to make of that.

That leads into the gospel. I was thinking earlier of tackling the Epistle, but decided against it. If I wanted to spend a lot of time at it, I just might, with good luck and sunny weather, be able to make something of Paul. But I’m feeling lazy. So, on to the gospel.

Now, look at the second half of the statement Jesus makes to Peter. The first half usually gets all the attention, the “. . . get behind me Satan . . .” business. But the second half gives the reason for Jesus’s response, “For you’ve set your mind not on divine things, but on human things.” If I didn’t know better, (Which I don’t.) I’d accuse Jesus of a sardonic sense of humor: he never explains these things, and they’re fruitful of tremendous theological disagreement later. But in what sense is Peter setting his mind on human things? That’s the question. It is not unusual to say that a human being is going to die, and if Peter has begun to think of Jesus as a divine being then, indeed, it becomes unusual to say that a divine being is going to die. That would be peculiar. According to his own understanding and according to the presuppositions of the time, Peter would be justified in denying that Jesus could die.

Now you do have the dying and rising Gods of antiquity, which get a lot of attention in theological and quasi-theological discussion. The difficulty in applying that imagery here is that it’s cyclical rather than historical. It happened every year. That doesn’t mean there isn’t truth in it. Spring is new life and Easter eggs do have a point, even if we’ve forgotten a good deal of it, but the point of an egg is not what resurrection is about.

So what is the human thing upon which Peter's mind is set? We get a glimpse of it if we go to Jesus addressing the crowd: "What will it profit a person to gain the whole world and forfeits his life?" In the gospels, life is always understood in terms of relationship and, therefore, in terms of meaning. One lives as long as one is in relationship that gives one's life meaning. It's quite possible to gain the whole world and forfeit one's life, if what it means to live is to be in relationships of meaning. It might be possible to control everything but be in meaningful relation to nothing. So the question becomes, in what way does Peter's action deny meaning to Jesus?

Well, I don't know the answer. But I can give you some suggestions. First, Jesus has a vocation, just as the rest of us do. Somehow Peter's statement is getting in the way of Jesus's vocation. To steal a person's vocation, to make it so that he (or she) cannot do what God has called him to do, is to deny true life to that person. I see this in children, sometimes, if their parents have a precise and deeply seated idea of what the child will become. If the child is strong, there's conflict. If the child is not as strong, or circumstances are unfavorable, there is a spiritual death. It's hard to tell, sometimes, what is going on. The distinction between legitimate discipline and the not quite so legitimate suppression of a vocation is sometimes not all that easy to detect.

So to deny Jesus his vocation is to deny him his life. Even if one's vocation ends in death, there is a sense of fullness, of completion, from having lived the vocation. Think of Mozart, who died young. After he'd finished his Requiem and his Forty-First Symphony, what more could he have done? In a good life, vocation is, at least somewhat, achieved. In a tragic life, it has been thwarted.

That's the first possibility. The second is a bit more theological. Jesus offers a different understanding of God. We're still in the process, in the church, of trying to wrap our minds around that different understanding. It's the usual problem of confusing our imagery about God with the real McCoy. We still insist on using all kinds of pre-Jesus imagery that we try to make OK by washing it through Jesus's story. And we have a lot of trouble doing so. I'm talking specifically of royal imagery: God as king, as ruler, as lord. In many Christian communities this has come to mean God as dictator and, eventually, God as tyrant. It's hidden in statements such as, "Well, God must have some secret reasons for . . ." followed by a description of some situation which is callous, cruel, or tragic. I hear this from people trying to come to grips with tragic deaths, with the deaths of children, or premature, violent or frightening deaths of all kinds. "God has called them home." Now between you, me and the lamp post, I would suggest that God didn't have much to do with it. But this kind of language is an attempt to grapple with a painful event by asserting that it has meaning which we cannot understand. Because of God the universe makes sense even when it doesn't make sense to us. The fact that God is all powerful becomes our tool for justifying pain, grief and loss. And, therefore, without the utmost care, for justifying senseless suffering, foolish human decisions, the domination of the weak by the strong and all sorts of things which call for prophetic denunciation rather than divine sanction.

Now I think to make God the justifier of inexplicable pain keeps us immature. In our attempt to have the world make sense (because that increases our sense of security) we ignore the fact that a fallen world may well make no sense at all. (One would expect a redeemed world to make

sense. A fallen world has fallen out of order, meaning, sense.) A fallen world may as well be fallen in meaning as in virtue. I'm not sure that the world, left to its own devices, does make sense. It doesn't appear so to me. I suspect that God calls a senseless world to make sense as much as he calls a wicked world to virtue. And I think we misread the Bible if we read it as a book of explanations. The Bible isn't a book of explanations, but a book of responses. God does not care to justify the presence of evil and pain to us. (To pose another question for another sermon, "Is suffering justifiable? Is it not, rather, something we should resist, something we should seek to eradicate from the world?") What God, in the Christian tradition, cares about is how we respond to evil and pain. It is not a question of explaining the presence of evil. That explanation may or may not be possible, I do not know. I have never seen one which satisfied me. The "problem of evil" does make for an interesting evening with dark beer and grilled cheese sandwiches. But the Christian tradition is after a response to evil, not an explanation of it. The real question is the depth of your caring response. It is what we do with the presence of such things in our lives and communities which is the question.

So when Peter tries to jockey Jesus in a realm without the presence of sin and death, even as these things affect God, even as they affect Jesus, he's trying to move the story into one of denial, in which we can preserve the belief that there is, somewhere, some pure realm unaffected by what goes on in this world and to that realm we can escape either in piety or through death.

The Christian answer is that you cannot escape responding to evil, even in heaven. To return to Revelation, in the last chapter, when God's will is finally done on earth as in heaven, you will notice that heaven also must be recreated. There is to be a new heaven. The reason is that the stain even of heaven's struggle with evil is wiped out when God triumphs.

This is not a comfortable message, because we'd like to believe that there is someplace to which we can escape. I think that Jesus is rebuking Peter because Peter is trying to preserve someplace to which we can escape. Even the person who has the words of meaning, the words of eternal life, says "I'm subject to the evil of the world, I'm subject to death." Then there is no place to escape. And the Christian tradition, unequivocally, unquestionably, asserts this: Resurrection is not an escape from death, but a passing through death to something else. Resurrection is not even an escape from the meaning of death, but a redemption of death, including death itself in new life. That's frequently missed about it. I frequently hear, "Death is OK because we're going to be resurrected." It's not OK. Death is still death, evil is still evil, and even a redeemed evil is still a memory of sorrow and an acceptance of the impact of sorrow and loss. The Christian perception is not that God is beyond these things, but that God shares these things. That's where the tension with the royal imagery comes in. The Royal imagery tempts us to say that God is beyond the suffering of the ordinary. And yet the key of the Christian tradition, when you start digging around in it, that which makes our conception of God different, is that God is not beyond these things, but shares them. Sometimes that gets buried, but it's really there in the tradition.

I think Peter is in revolt against this idea that God must share in the human condition before the human condition can be redeemed. This, by the way, if I may get technical on you for a minute, is my problem with substitutionary atonement theories. Such theories say that Christ substitutes himself for us and we then become spectators to our salvation. I think a truer way to

put it is that by sharing the human situation with us, God enables that situation to have meaning and, therefore, to have life. Substitutionary atonement is a way of keeping the divine and the human from meeting each other in the sorrow and pain of our existence. That meeting is what Christianity is about. And that's how our lives come to have meaning, and that's why Christianity can say, "There is hope."

OK. That's the second point, that Peter does not accept the new understanding of God offered by Jesus. And, of course, the characteristic mark of Satan is that he doesn't accept who God is. So the application of that epithet to Peter turns out to be appropriate. If you opt for power (even in the understanding of God) rather than love, then you opt for Satan rather than God. Period. So many pictures of the nature of God opt for divine power rather than divine love. They fail to grapple with the core of the Christian tradition which says, 'Yes, God is all powerful but he is only all powerful if you accept that, ultimately, love triumphs over death. If you don't accept that, and place God's power somewhere else, in control, in manipulation of the creation, then you are a pagan, no matter how Christian your language or regular your church attendance.

To be a Christian means that you must accept the idea that God ultimately triumphs because love does. It is not power independent of love which defines the nature of the Christian God, but power through the expression of love.

Now for the third point in the spectrum. Jesus says to the crowd, "Take up your cross and follow me." Then he goes on to say: ". . . those who are ashamed of me, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes into the glory of his Father." And I would warn us here of getting a bit too focused on particular sets of language. The reality of Jesus is broader than my use of the name, of the church's use of the name. One can be unashamed of Jesus, and, I think, never have heard the name and know nothing about the Christian tradition. I expect that if there is life on that mythical planet Zot on the other side of the galaxy that I keep talking about, that the same question about the acceptance or rejection of Jesus is valid there even though Jesus and the whole Christian tradition is, in one sense, confined to our earthly story. In other words, I'm proposing that compassion is a metaphysical universal. It's like mass – it works everywhere in the creation. The temptation is to think that it needs to be something that happens in our tradition, and therefore, we have to convert everyone to being like us. I expect that we have been placed in this world with all its variety, not to homogenize each other, but to learn from each other and appreciate each other. I expect this constitutes a grace of God for our development and education. It's a bit like why I'm thankful for four gospels: the different approaches, the variety, the color, the disagreements, I find helpful. It would have been disastrous for Christianity if we had a single, homogenized story of Jesus – although our Christmas pageants do try to do that.

So this is another, although minor aspect of Jesus's rebuke of Peter. Peter, allow the story to unfold. Don't put your box around it. Accept God's actions through the unexpected. Be at peace with that. We do find God in unexpected places and ways. Perhaps you will even find God in my (Jesus's) acceptance of dying. But to do that, you must accept my death. We find God in what we accept, not in what we reject.