

Two of the hymns we sang this morning make points to which I want to refer. The opening hymn, (**Hymnal 1982, #455, *O love of God, how strong and true***) speaks of how God's love comes to us and is known by us. In the second verse, the author says that we read, we understand, we appreciate this love in the natural world. Then he drops that theme and goes elsewhere.

Now, anyone who stops to think about it knows that reading God's love in the natural world is a somewhat dangerous affair. After all, the natural world does a lot of other things besides take care of people. It also kills them. So, if we are going to read God's love in the natural world, we shouldn't do it in an immature, or perhaps even a dishonest, way which doesn't acknowledge what that world of nature really is. If I read love in the sunset, what do I read in the bubonic plague? Both are, are they not, parts of the natural world?

I don't want to discourage you from finding God in the natural world, but to encourage you to find him there in a mature way. Think it through and then find God there. But how? I'm working on it. I'm working on it. Give me time. I'm only 62 and been working on this question for 45 years, not nearly long enough to develop an adequate answer.

The third verse does give a hint about how we might do this. It says, "We read thee best . . .", we discover the love of God most deeply, ". . . in him who came to bear for us the cross of shame . . ." In the life of Jesus we see something parallel to the double sidedness of the natural world. That life also is not something just cute and cuddly. I find a horror, failure and perpetual disconnect from success in the human experience of Jesus as well as in the indifference of nature to human fate. So I think there is a kind of parallel here. It would benefit us to explore it. To truly follow Jesus is no safer than climbing a mountain or sailing the ocean. There is danger in the choice of Christian life as there is in the natural world.

Now, that's all from that hymn, #455. Continue on to the hymn paraphrase of Psalm 19 (**Carl Daw Jr., *God's glory fills the heavens***). I need to find the passage I want. Ah yes. It's in the third verse. "God's servant may I ever be . . ." Pardon me for putting it this way, but that's a platitude. Christians are always flopping around saying they want to be God's servants. Whether we've thought about the implications, well, I won't speak for anyone but myself. I can sing this hymn only with an odd double meaning which goes something like this: "Sometimes I want to want to be God's servant." The rest of the time, I'm far too focused on things more immediate. I'm not thinking about it. Sometimes I find myself just wishing that God would go away and leave me alone. Maybe I'll get over that when I grow up, but I haven't managed it yet. Now we all know about these feelings, we need to recognize them, but not take them too seriously, so let's go on to the second point in the hymn.

This statement is a little more peculiar, ". . . this world, my joy . . ." Being God's servant is joined to the statement of taking joy, finding joy, in this world. One of the oddities of Christianity is its affirmation (shared with Judaism) of the creation. But this hymn implies that taking joy in this world is part of being a servant of God. This world being my joy is part of

being a servant of God. The profound unease which comes with being God's servant may have something to do with a demand that we find joy in a world in which all that comes into being dies. Or, perhaps, taking joy in so ambiguous a world as this, in which the natural world is filled with beauty and majesty which reminds us of God and, at the same time, with an utter indifference to human well being. And yes, one challenge of servanthood is to live a focused life, remembering God, but another, equally profound, challenge is to maintain joy in a world constantly slipping through our fingers. And I fail as much at the one as at the other. But the question is not whether I succeed in my seeking of these things, but do I remember to seek them both? Is my desire to live a servant's life marked by a balance of focused life and joy in creation?

Just an observation to show the trouble we have understanding our call to servanthood with sufficient breadth: I have never seen a Lenten discipline based on trying to persuade people to take more joy in the world around them in order to be better servants of God. I suggest that if we take our servanthood seriously we will realize that giving up things for Lent may have a double edge, one side of which is not safe. Refusing to use that which God gives us, in which we ought to take joy, is, surely, a spiritual discipline which ought to be used with some caution. In other words, be careful not to fall into the trap of thinking that what we give up during Lent is the thing itself. Chocolate, for instance, is unabashedly and completely good as a thing and, as such, there's no virtue in giving it up. But if Lent is not about giving up things, what we're about starts to become a bit more subtle. What we're about is the ordering of relationships between ourselves and things. It is the relation which requires our attention. More on that later.

One pitfall of Lenten abstinence is that it's easier to give up something if we are silently saying to ourselves, "This thing really isn't all that important. I can do without it." But true Lenten discipline says, "This thing is important to me. It is legitimate to rejoice in it. Nevertheless, the relationship between it and myself needs some attention." That's something else, a bit more subtle. But if we don't approach any Lenten discipline with a bit of that attitude, we end up, unconsciously, claiming that the creation is either undesirable or trivial and we need to be able to do without it. I can think of few statements more anti-incarnational, more opposed to the spirit of Christ. It would seem to imply that the creation is, at best, a kind of drag and we need to rise superior to it. And my comment is, "Who do we think we are? We're part of that creation, as much as a bar of chocolate. The question is not whether we can do without it, but what is our relation to it?"

So, part of the spiritual discipline of Lent needs to be learning how to take joy in the world that the world may become God's joy. Abstinence which does not keep joy in mind, which does not aim at joy, is a sub-Christian thing. I'll give one illustration and then I could go on to something else, or, depending on how I'm feeling, end it.

In 1 Corinthians 7 it looks as if Paul is discussing marriage, but he's really discussing how squabbling Christians ought to try to understand each other. He says OK, you folks who are married, it's all right to separate yourselves, occasionally, if you want to focus on praying. But then, in the best Pauline fashion, he says something utterly incomprehensible (or untranslatable). It's 7:5b, translated in the RSV as ". . . and then some together again . . ." Nobody has been able to successfully translate it into English. If you look at this odd 1/3 of a verse, you will

discover a wide variety of interpretations.

The interpretation I prefer, and which, for a number of reasons, I believe Paul preferred, goes something like this: You may separate yourselves, you married couple, for a time, for prayer. But then you must come back together again. The structure of the Greek is such that I think that Paul is asserting that one of the goods of the separation is the coming together at the end of it. Well, one of the goods of giving up chocolate during Lent (assuming it's not for medical purposes, in which case you ought to give it up for good, not just for Lent) is resuming the use of it at the end of the time of abstinence. I do not mean the pedagogical function of teaching us to appreciate something by depriving us of it artificially for a time, but the joy which comes from returning to a portion of life we have surrendered to voluntarily focus elsewhere.

Christianity needs to do more with the spirituality of joy at the end of absence. The very beginning of our Eucharist Service address this. "Blessed be God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And blessed be his kingdom, now and forever." We refer to God and God's goals for us, when the community gathers again after absence. It is a sharing of who we understand ourselves to be -- a community defined by God and oriented toward the Kingdom. But we don't understand Eucharist, we don't understand this event in which we are now engaged, as well as we might, unless we can somehow understand this community as shaped in and by the separation we experience from each other the rest of the week being overcome by this coming together, in this, pardon me for putting it this way, completely unlikely collection of people. What other reason, besides God, would we have for being together? Our thanksgiving, our joy, arises from the restoration of a community which affirms our direction -- toward the kingdom -- and which affirms the foundation enabling us to hold the kingdom in view -- God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

So, I offer you a bit of twist to Lenten discipline, and some suggestion, not about what to do, because giving Episcopalians suggestions about what to do is usually a futile enterprise, at least around here. But giving Episcopalians suggestions about how to approach something, how to think about it, some things to mull over, is usually a much more fruitful enterprise.

Now a word or two on the gospel and its relation to all this and I'm done.

Remember that in clearing the temple Jesus is also clearing the means of performing the worship of God in the prescribed manner. That aspect of his action is sometimes overlooked. But, unless those animals are there, worship can't go on in the way in which people thought it was supposed to go on. Unless the money changers are there, worship can't go on as people thought was respectful and in compliance with God's law. One couldn't use ordinary Roman money in any way associated with the worship of God. Why? Because it had a picture of the emperor on it, and the emperor was a quasi-divine being. The distinction between his bust on the coin and an idol was tissue thin. Those money changers were performing a necessary service if the worship of God was not to violate the first (or second, depending on how you cut the cake) commandment: Don't have graven images. One would be offering God a graven image if Roman money were used in the temple or used to purchase an offering for use in the temple.

I sometimes wonder about the implications of this relative to the bills that go into the

collection plate. There, we might even say, is an engraven image. Given the prevalence of a nationalistic religion in this country, one does wonder about the implications. Perhaps those ancient Jews were on to something. But that's a side issue.

The real issue is that the radicalness of Jesus is to be found neither in the violence of his clearing the temple nor in his interference with the standard practices of a key social institution, but in his rejecting a whole complex method of relating to God. That way of worshiping God, the story seems to say, ends in corruption. Now there is in French a proverb, for me to attempt to pronounce it in French would be an act of assault, which summarizes the point nicely. It's a rude saying, and goes, roughly, "The nearer to the church, the farther from God." We, as a Christian community, will not understand our true position in the world, until we grapple with the implications of that proverb, until we grapple with the implications of Jesus throwing those money changers and merchants from the temple. Remember, he not only throws out the money changers, the human beings, but the text is very clear, he throws out the animals also and does not collect the money for a proper use, but overturns the tables, thus rejecting its very reality in that context.

Ordinarily we would say that the animals are innocent and have nothing to do with the problem. But to Jesus they do, because they are part and parcel of that old way of relating to God which has to go. In the church, part of a sound Lenten discipline is always to be entertaining the possibility that our encounter with Christ needs to clean out our courtyards. There's no reason why the tradition of our -- or anyone else's -- worship of God needs, ultimately, to be the way it is. Part of Christian maturity is being able to entertain the possibility that we may be called to change it. This is not an assertion that we necessarily are called to change now, that's not the point. The point is the possibility, at a moments notice, that we may be called to be something different from what we had thought we were called to be. To be a Christian is to be in enough of a conversation with God to be able to entertain that possibility. Those Jews in the temple courtyard were operating according to tradition. Guess what: That sounds Episcopalian. They had the advantage of a developed and carefully thought out interpretation of Holy Scripture, which supported every aspect of exactly what they were doing. And we have theologians, and the Book of Common Prayer, and tradition, and also the temptation to rely on these to the exclusion of loving hearts and informed minds in dialogue with God.

And yet, when confronted with the reality of the presence of God, what those ancient merchants and money changers were doing turned out not just to be inadequate now and again, but to be something which needed to be driven out. I do not think that my experience, my intelligence, my knowledge of the church's tradition and my theological skills, my worship and prayer, even my caring about God, are necessarily enough superior to those of the men in that ancient temple courtyard, that I can afford to believe Jesus could not also come to me with a whip of cords. Realizing the contingency of the concrete aspects of our relation with God is a part of what Lent is about.

On that note, that's enough.