

Collect for Easter 3 BCP p. 224

John 21:1-19

The people who choose lectionary readings sometimes select short passages which cover a single theme, such as this morning's reading from *Revelation*. But sometimes, for reasons unbeknownst to me, they choose long readings which cover a great many points, as in this morning's gospel. This leaves it to the preacher to decide which points will be tackled on any given Sunday morning, assuming that he'll be reasonable. In my case, this behavior doesn't work well, as I'm content to be somewhat like Tennyson's brook and go on forever, covering just as many points as the selectors of the passages.

So I'm going to add a point to all those made in the short Epistle and the interminable Gospel, one that comes from the collect. The collect begins, "O God, whose blessed Son made himself known to his disciples in the breaking of bread . . ." (In today's Gospel Jesus makes himself known to his disciples through shared participation in a meal, "in the breaking of bread.") The collect continues with the request proper ". . . Open the eyes of our faith, that we may behold him in all his redeeming work . . ." That's a simple petition in form, but very audacious in substance. After all, to ask God that we somehow become aware of all of his redeeming work is a rather large request.

If the history of Christianity is any indication God has a soft spot for big requests. After all, we are encouraged to pray "for the redemption of the world." But even more than noticing the audacious boldness of a huge request, we need to seek some understanding. What do we mean by "beholding redeeming work"? Let's begin, perhaps not at the beginning, since I'm not sure where that is, but with a rough definition of "redeem." Don't confuse redemption with either a remaking of something or a substitution of one thing for another. The point is that to be redeemed from our sin does not mean to get rid of it. We might ask God to remake us so that our sin would no longer be a part of us or we might ask God to substitute virtuous behavior for a previous evil behavior. Both of these request would lack a complete understanding of the place of sin and redemption in the Christian life.

Sin is a part of whoever we are, and past sin cannot be simply discarded. It's just there as inanimate, immoveable, weighty, fixed fact. The facticity of the past cannot be changed. To be redeemed from sin means to change one's relationship with it so that it does not make you who you are, but something else does. When the love of God reshapes our being, it is the sinful self which is reshaped, not abandoned or dissolved or surgically removed, but changed in meaning. So redemption doesn't mean to erase the past so it's no longer in the book, but to offer a new way of using the past so that whatever we have been, under whatever circumstances, becomes available for building the Kingdom of God. In redemption, even our sins contribute to the Kingdom. If you want to talk about audacious claims, there's another audacious claim.

This is what Christianity is about. We make a mistake, and not an innocent one, when we

turn Christianity into a moral improvement society that says that the object of religion is to teach us moral behavior and then encourages us to practice it by threatening us with what would be immoral behavior on the part of any being other than God: the condemning of people to an everlasting hell for the performance of time bound evils in which even malice is rooted in ignorance or social blindness, or insufficiently educated love. (If you believe you catch some sarcasm in this statement, you are correct.) Now you have my opinion on the subject.

No, it won't do. The popular conception of Christianity as a moral coaching society trivializes not only the church and its message, it also trivializes God. God is not an ethics coach in the sky. If we listen carefully to the New Testament, it says God redeems, God offers new life. This means a new way of being that re-uses our old lives, not discarding them to allow us to start over. We never get to start over and live our lives again. We do get to recast the meaning of the life we have had. I fear this language about starting over again, so popular in much of Christianity. It has to be used cautiously. Yes, we do get a chance to begin again. But no, when we start over, we don't start over with a clean slate. We always start over from where we've been and the new life always includes who we've been. Look at Pilgrim's Progress. What makes Pilgrim who he is, is not where he comes from (The City of Destruction) so much as where he's going (The City of God, the New Jerusalem). His future, his hope, determines the meaning of his past and so redeems it.

As long as your sight is fixed on heaven, that's where you're going. The core of Christianity is not moral improvement, but remembering where we are going. Remembering heaven gives us the framework for the shaping and reshaping of our lives. (Note how much of the picture of the Heavenly City in the Book of Revelation is devoted to describing heavenly worship.) It gives us the kind of meaning that God, I think, wants our lives to have. It is the picture of the worship of God, of acknowledging God, of sensing God's presence. After all, worship is the formalization of a sense of God's presence. Because we remember him formally here (at worship) we have a chance of remembering him oftener and more completely and complexly elsewhere. That is the objective of it all. I have watched the drive for moral improvement actually separate a person from God. After all, if I become better and better and so approach perfection on my own hook and crook then the need for relationship with God becomes less and less. There is a kind of arrogance which frequently accompanies successful morality. After all, don't good people deserve heaven? And the Christian should be quite cautious with any form of arrogance, even if assumed for a good purpose and as the result of good deeds.

So the redeeming work of Christ is not to make us better and better, although that may, and one hopes will, happen as a result of the work of Christ. But his primary work is to help us become more and more related. The goal of Christianity is the creation, cultivation, maintenance, of a relationship with God. That relationship with God is something which continues no matter what the moral condition of our lives may be. The Middle Ages were, in some ways, better at recognizing this than we are and provided many ways for people to maintain friendship with God even when they had trouble maintaining their morality.

The danger for us is that in putting all our eggs of redemption in the moral basket, when we don't behave properly there's a tendency to deny it because there is so much riding on our

behavior and, ultimately, we are so unsuccessful in bringing it to any sort of completion or perfection. And denial is frequently more dangerous than behavior denied.

Moral dynamics aside, the key to redeeming work is fostering relationship. That's why the shared meal of Eucharist is so important. It is the symbol as well as a part of the reality of that shared relationship between God and humans. Participation in Eucharist fosters relationship, if we are at all open to it. From the beginning of the church there has been a recognition of our need for a symbol of our relationship with God, a symbol which, on a regular basis, reminds us of that relationship.

Notice that the collect does not just ask that we behold Christ in his redeeming work, but it adds that little word "all." I'm going to offer you one way of understanding that "all," a way upon which I in no way insist, but which I offer to you for your reflection.

To behold Christ in all his redeeming work means to have a way so that each instant of our lives can be related back to our friendship with God. Christ's redeeming work can only be that of relating the creation to its one Lord. It is this weaving of our existence into a unity of relationship with God that is the goal of what we are about in Eucharist. If we look at the structure of this service, we are always turning it into a means of offering everything to God. Consider the Prayers of the People. We pray for this category and examples from it, we pray for that category, we pray for some other category of humans, their actions and their sufferings, and then, because we may have missed something, there is a period of silence into which you may put anybody or anything you please. The Prayers of People, if we would use them so, are capable of encompassing the universe. In them one can as well pray for the inhabitants of the Andromeda Galaxy, if any, as not. And in this prayer, the whole universe is centered on God, is moved toward redemption.

Of course there is the Offertory in which bread and wine are brought forward and offered to God. The bread and wine stand for everything which has gone on in our lives at least since the last time we've done this together and maybe before that. Once again, it is a symbol which, because it is in itself empty, can have anything from the concreteness of our existence, placed into it. The accusation which I occasionally hear, about the meaningless symbols of the church, arises, I think, largely from people who do not understand that the symbols of the church have meaning when we put something into them. The church's job, if you will, is to provide us with the taxicab of worship, but putting someone into the taxicab in order to go somewhere, that is the job that faces every particular congregation. Of course Eucharist, considered in the abstract, is only a form. It acquires meaning when our lives are placed within the framework of the symbol, placed in relation to a symbol which, because it is empty in and of itself, can contain all the redeeming work done by Christ from the beginning of the world until its end. When we celebrate Eucharist we are in touch with, we are a part of, the offering of all creation back to the Father. Our prayer "gives voice to every creature under heaven", (BCP p. 373, Eucharistic Prayer D).

So to behold Christ in all his redeeming work might mean, in one sense, simply to use

Eucharist as it is intended to be used. It is within our participation in this symbolic event that we begin to behold all the redeeming work of Christ because we are inside a symbol capable of containing and expressing all of that work.

Well, I think that's enough for today. Please stand for the creed.