

## Easter 3B

**1 John 3:1-7**  
**Luke 24:36b-48**

Let's begin with the *1<sup>st</sup> Letter of John*, with the phrase, "We're God's children now, what we will be has not yet been revealed."

"What we will be has not yet been revealed." That's a nice way of saying, "We don't know where we're going or what we'll be like when we arrive." I find that quite descriptive of my experience of Christian life. Most of the time I don't know where I'm going. I've been trying to figure out where I'm going for a good 40 plus years. When someone has it figured out I'm interested in hearing all about it. But in fact, I'm suspicious of people who are a little too certain. I find that certainty about life's journey doesn't necessarily go with love. People who are certain about what those they love are going to do or ought to do are frequently certain about a fantasy. When they try to live that fantasy there is pain at best and disaster at worst. Love involves both an acceptance of uncertainty and also a faithful connection to that about which we are uncertain.

I take off my glasses for the next statement and look fixedly at the corner of the room, so, if asked later if I said to any person what I'm going to say, I can truthfully answer, "No, I didn't say it to a single person." Only to the corner of the room. I expect it's the same way with God. God may be no more certain of what we're up to than we are of what God is up to. That's what it means to give a world freedom.

In saying that I move against a long tradition in Christian theology. Well, so be it. It is not only the privilege, but also the morally required task of every generation of Christians to rethink its faith from the foundation up. If we do not do that and do not ask these questions, then we are being irresponsible to God. So, I'm going to ask the question, recognizing that as well informed Episcopalians, you know that you can answer it any way you want to. Simply because I'm sitting up here dressed in funny cloths does not make me the answer man. In fact, it is the task of clergy – I'd better say this to the corner too – to encourage their congregations to ask sensible questions, not merely to proclaim standard answers.

Now I like giving answers. It puts me in a position of authority. It soothes my ego. It elevates me in my own esteem. Whether it does your spiritual lives any good is a completely different question. If the story of Jesus means anything, it means that being a Christian does not always involve clarity, light and the safety of the protection of an authority. There was a crucifixion in there, and no set of answers saved him from it. Jesus is quite explicit about it. He says to his followers, "Be prepared to pick up your cross and follow me." That's definitive. If that is to happen in life in general, we must expect it to happen in the intellectual parts of our lives also. Picking up our crosses, in the intellectual parts of our lives, may well mean rethinking some cherished assumptions from the bottom up and that may mean, especially in the light of what I first said about love, that God is not, perhaps, exactly what we thought him to be.

In fact, I think that we quite misunderstand the idea of faith in God. Faith is not being able to give an adequate description of what you have faith in. Faith is knowing that description is worth searching for. So faith in God does not depend on being able to write a systematic

theology. I've no objections to systematic theologies. They're useful tools for crystallizing each age's apprehensions and misapprehensions about God. (It's far easier to recognize an error when it's clearly stated than to recognize one when it's muddled.) So systematics are useful for a number of different things. Not only do they give us the truth, but also they present the peculiar errors of an age in a crystalline enough way that they are easier of apprehension for subsequent generations.

So faith is not so much believing in some sort of stable, stateable entity as it is being convinced that it is worthy of a life's attention to seek that entity, to try, as far as one can, to base one's life upon it, and never, ever, fall into the trap of thinking we have arrived before the journey is over.

A long time ago, in what practically feels like that proverbial galaxy far, far away, when I was trying to figure out what to do with my life and, therefore, what I thought about life – in other words, when I was an undergrad, this issue, what I was going to do with God, came up. And, of course, I started at the wrong end. I started thinking about what God was like and could I believe in that or not. Then, gradually, I discovered that the question and my response turned itself inside out. What became clear to me was that life without faith was not worth living, but, I had no idea in particular, concrete ways about what to have faith in. Now I certainly knew some things I did not have faith in. So one is not without guidance. For instance, I ended up having faith that community is worth more than isolation; that caring is worth more than despising or ignoring; that seeking is, somehow, more satisfactory than trying to justify the status quo.

Does one begin to get a sense of what God is about when one puts these things together? I think, yes. But the picture which comes to me is blurry around the edges. It doesn't have quite the crystal clarity of Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. In fact, sometimes I can only judge that I'm on the right path because the search continues to be rewarding and exciting. When the search becomes boring, at least for a length of time, I begin to worry about where I'm going.

I think there's something like this behind the statement that “. . . what we will be has not yet been revealed . . .”. What we will be has not yet been revealed and, therefore, the God who calls us to be that has also not been fully revealed to us. Part of the courage that Christianity requires is the acceptance of a certain amount of uncertainty.

So that's the first point. The second one is, oddly enough, in the lesson's next sentence. “What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him for we will see him as he is.”

This needs to be taken seriously. It would be taken more seriously were this an Eastern Orthodox gathering rather than a western Christian one. In the Eastern Orthodox Church salvation is understood as human beings becoming like God. So there is a long tradition of this in the Christian community. I'm not proposing anything out of line or strange when I say that the ultimate destiny of human beings is to become like God. Why do we become like God? Because we have been through this process I have just explained, of seeking to understand and to act a life founded on that understanding. But the Christian life is not an arrival at certainty, it is

the process that precedes certainty.

I do not know where all this business came from about Christians knowing God well enough to be able to proclaim him to others. I can't teach anyone about God. Now I can teach you about other people's theologies. But that's not teaching you about God, but about what other people have thought about God. It's not that what others have thought about God isn't important. Their thoughts can be illuminating, helpful, it can lead to an Ah-Ha! experience that says, "Ah Ha, this is the next stage for me." So I'm not rejecting theology. But notice the Biblical understanding of Evangelism. It is not to teach people who God is, but to witness to God's presence. And that's something quite different. Friendship grows from presence, analysis requires distance.

The job of the church, in its evangelism and its witness, is to discover where God is present in other's lives, in institutions, and to name that as being the case. Where is God in you? It's my job to look at each person in this congregation in order to discern how God expresses himself through you. Rather more difficult, perhaps, is for you to do the same with me. But that's a far, far cry from teaching you what God is. The key, I think, is witness, not definition; the process of discernment, not the propositional content of belief systems.

Granted, witness is messier. Let's get a nice, clear definition of God and go with that because then everything is tidy. I haven't been tidy for 40 years, and all you have to do is look at my office. But in the Christian life there is a certain virtue in directed chaos. It allows us to be spoken to. The tighter, the more precise my understanding of God, the less chance I will pick up those little hints of new direction the Spirit provides. The parts need to fit together loosely enough that new apprehension can seep in. So, in this whole process of us becoming like God, which the author of 1 John asserts is the goal of being human, we are not to be disturbed because we do not know exactly where we are going. This is, ultimately, what hope and faith are about. Not to allow ourselves to become anxious because we do not understand our own end, but, and this is one of the fundamental aspects of faith, to trust that somehow love is a primary enough reality that the end is to be accepted in hope.

OK. I have been avoiding like the plague the really troublesome parts of this lesson and I'll just say a few words on that and then end it.

This business about sin – “. . . and no one who abides in him sins, no one who sins has either seen him or known him . . .” This starts being divisive, if one isn't careful. The sheep are over here, the goats over there. How can we say, that no one who abides in Jesus sins and that no one who sins has either seen or known him? My suggestion is that we think about this in terms of the process that the author of the *1st Letter to John* has already set up: faith is the journey, not the result. To abide in Christ means to continue the journey. There is nothing we can do, moral or immoral, which cannot be dealt with if we abide in the journey. That does not mean that we can't be unutterably stupid. It happens all the time, even to Christians. So in Christ there is no sin, because, to use the traditional language, all our sin can be incorporated and will be incorporated into God's glory. As long as we remain in the journey, we can't do anything so

peculiar that God cannot give us a future which incorporates that and turns it to the good. That's what reconciliation is about. It's not forgetting, but recognizing the truth of injury and incorporating that truth into a creative future. In other words, we surprise God, because God has to be constantly reshaping his plans and his desires to work with what we have become. After all, if Christ bears a cross, then God is bearing it also. The cross that God bears is the constant loss of what he sees this world capable of being. The resurrection, which also applies to God, is God's constant recreation of a new and hopeful vision which can incorporate the loss of his original vision into the new plan. Even in God, the divine life is a constant process of overcoming loss, perhaps even dismay, at what human creatures make of their world.

It is too simple, too simple by far, to say that the Christian life consists of obeying the rules and being good boys and girls. The Christian life consists of the constant struggle to incorporate loss and pain into love. It is in doing this, in incorporating loss and pain into love, that we become like God, because for God to continue to love his creation and offer to his creation life and hope, that's precisely what God has to do.

That's enough of that. Please stand for the creed.