

Lent 1C 2010

Let's look at a couple of quotes from the text of the Gradual hymn, #147 in the *Hymnal 1982*, "*Now let us all with one accord.*" At the bottom hymn you'll find all kinds of interesting things that people never look at, such as authors, composers and dates. You'll see that this text is attributed to Pope Gregory the Great (Pope 590-610). Whenever you see "attributed," it means that the person named as author is commonly said to have written the text, but we're not really sure. On the other hand we do know that the text is very old, so Gregory will do for an author as well as anyone. What tended to happen in the early Church was that if they didn't know who had written a popular hymn, it was attributed to someone well known. This was done, oddly enough, not in a spirit of deception, but in assertion that this material was a part of the Christian tradition and, because it was part of that tradition, it was to be identified with a human being who was also part of the tradition. The Christian tradition does not consist of ideas or books or theological treatises, but, at its core, of human beings and their lives. This sense of the utter humanness of the tradition overcame any sense of the primacy of historical accuracy, and therefore of the necessity of an historically correct identification of the author of a text.

The early church, in its sensitivity to the nature of its tradition, said, "This material, which may be truly anonymous, needs, somehow, to be humanized and, therefore, Gregory wrote it, or Origen, or Chrysostom, or who you will." The important thing was that it have a human origin and that that human origin be a part of the Christian tradition. It's important to understand this about early Christianity, because I've known people who started to study Church history and become disturbed when they found out that some works were attributed to authors who probably didn't write them. This applies to most books of the New Testament. The early church was stronger on devotion and theology than historical science.

Gregory the Great lived from about 540 until 604 and was important enough that hymn texts were "attributed" to him. What was happening during his life? The last vestiges of Rome were disappearing from the map, but the Middle Ages hadn't arrived. It was a difficult and confused period. People were remembering the Roman glory in the face of present disaster. Consequently they said things that sounded modern. I refer you to this hymn #147, especially vs. 3. "Your love, O Lord, our sinful race has not returned, but falsified . . ."

This is an interesting way to understand the nature of sin. (It's Lent, so I'm going to be talking about things such as sin and death.) It's hard to escape the picture, standard in our culture, that sin is not keeping the rules. To an extent it's OK to think about it that way. It doesn't excite me as a theological understanding. There is something more profound about what Gregory had to say that sin consists not of not returning love, but falsifying it. I love my children dearly, but wish they'd act in ways with which I'm comfortable. Suddenly the love is not about *what* I love, but about how *I* feel. This sets it on the road toward falsehood. My feeling is the center, not the object in the external world.

Most of us do this. I enjoy leading worship. I might even say I love my vocation as a priest; but when someone gets in the way of how I think church life should go, that love for my profession and church gets twisted into a pretzel and it becomes about me again, not about the

sharing of the glory. As long as I sit here asking myself if I stole any paper clips from the office this week – I’m trivializing and that’s not fair. As long as I think about whether or not I have kept the rules, I’m in grave danger of missing whether or not I’ve been falsifying my love.

One key to dealing with this is to remember that God is generous enough that he hardly ever gives us only one way to get where we’re going. (Sorry, guys with the One Way campaign, but you didn’t do your theological homework.) God believes in obscure short cuts, cross trails, multiple beginning points. He gives us a great deal of complexity to work with in forming our paths toward him.

This Lent I would suggest that you use any set of rules you wish in your self-examination, but add to it the question about falsifying love. This is a rather subtle question, but to the point because it leads to thinking not just about what I have done or not done (such questions preserve the self-centeredness at the root of sin), but about the real condition of the object of my love in the real world. I have met few people more disagreeable than those who can tick off all the rules in the book and are very aware of their own righteousness. May I be thoroughly preserved from those who are righteous and know it.

That’s point #1. On to the second quote from the hymn, from vs 4: “Remember, Lord, though frail we be, in your own image were we made; help us, lest in anxiety . . .” Now doesn’t that sound 20th and 21st century? “Lest in anxiety we cause your name to be betrayed.”

What’s this about anxiety? I’m not sure, but will offer a suggestion. If it doesn’t work for you, dispose of it. God’s name is Biblical shorthand for God’s identity. Since we are made in God’s image it is possible for us to betray that identity of God which we hold within ourselves. In other words, Gregory is here talking about our identity, how it is formed and how we honor and maintain it. If we are Christians we honor and maintain our identity by, among other things, searching for God’s identity within ourselves, within our humanity. This anxiety comes from thinking, maybe, that the connection with God isn’t there. Maybe it’s unreal, maybe the image is just accident. In the Christian life we are always searching for that image, in ourselves, in others and I would say, even in the universe. The image of the love of God is stamped upon the nature of being itself.

It is that origin of love in the nature of being that Christianity sets out to find. We do not create the image (after all it’s already there), but we do proclaim it and witness to it whenever we see it. Therefore we overcome the anxiety that comes to us because those things to which we have given our lives fail – and they all do. The institutions we serve don’t last and frequently change beyond recognition before final failure; the human relationships we create end in death, everything gets worn away until it’s dust. This transience is the origin of our anxiety.

Yet Gregory is saying, “Do not let this make you anxious!” The image of God is still yours and to find that image in yourself and others and claim it, and live from the knowledge and awareness of that image is to overcome anxiety. Even if you’re not fully aware of it and don’t know it, live from the search for it.

When I find that this anxiety in my own life has been overcome, I will certainly tell you all

about it. In the meantime, don't expect solutions from me. Fortunately my job as a priest doesn't require me to be the truth, but merely to witness to it. This is an important, distinction which has sometimes been lost by at least parts of the church.

That's the second quote from the hymn I wanted to bring to your attention.

The final quote is from vs. 5: "Therefore, we pray you Lord, forgive . . ." There is a reason given, in that last verse, for God to forgive: ". . . so when our wandering here shall cease, we may with you forever live . . ."

I'm not sure what this language about living forever actually means, because I haven't yet lived on the far side of death (for which I am somewhat grateful). Language about post-mortem existence tends to be highly illusive, highly symbolic, and highly non-literal. And yet, it's easy to be mistaken about it and to fall into the trap of thinking that such language is about states of existence that we would experience in this ordinary world. I don't think that's the case. I think everlasting life language is really about the nature of relationship with God. I cannot assert anything about life after death aside from its rootedness in a relationship with God. It does not exist, at least to my mind, as a thing in itself which can be observed and discussed anymore than I can observe or discuss the nature of my relationship with my family ten years in the future. I do not know what that's going to be like. I trust that it will be well, and that trust is not irrational. There is a track record. But do I know? No, I don't.

So what about the quote's forgiveness language? Why do we forgive and why do we rebuild relationships after they've been broken? We do that because it's the foundation on which the mystery of a trust in God is built. That trust is built on present forgiveness of ourselves by God and by others and on our present forgiveness of others. It's difficult to trust the future of a hole in oneself and that's what the brokenness of our relations creates – inner emptiness. It's much easier for me to imagine trusting a God whose relationship with me has been broken and mended many times over. It's difficult for me to imagine trusting a God with whom I have had a relationship that has become merely emptiness, a relationship made largely of the ruptures created by unforgiven deeds. Forgiveness mends us toward the future.

That's enough on the hymn. You'll notice I'm avoiding today's Biblical lessons. I realized I'm tired of preaching on the temptations of Jesus and have nothing to say about them. I'd rather do something else. You'll all just have to suffer.

A couple of words on today's collect and that will be enough. Look at the Collect for the First Sunday in Lent (Book of Common Prayer p. 218). It says, "Come quickly to help us who are assaulted. . ." then, as the church frequently does, it tells God how he's going to do his job. ". . . and, as you know the weakness of each of us, let each one find you mighty to save . . ." Notice that the assertion that the weakness of each of us is distinct. Mine is not the same as yours. As I occasionally tell governing boards and BAC's and vestries, part of what makes a Christian community is knowing the concrete, specific goods that other people are good for. You're not going to get the members of a community to be good for everything as a mass. Where is it that your supporting them can be effective in helping them find an image of God in

themselves? It takes intelligence to understand how to love. Or at least it helps. So God, as he knows the weakness of each one of us (that particular constellation of vulnerabilities that make us open to anxiety) then let each one find him mighty to save. God's response is not generic. His response is to that individual in his or her unique constellation of weaknesses and gifts.

The church has its own temptations. The perfection that we seek is not in the church, it's in God. The church as institution has its temptations. Each church also has a constellation of unique weaknesses. One common one is to toss people into boxes, to forget that the church's job is to respond to the weakness of each in its uniqueness and then to support the gifts given to each also in his or her uniqueness. The church is to foster community as a tissue of unidentical loves. If we focus on the maintenance of institutions, then the temptation is to forget the fostering of that tissue of unique loves and the support that needs to be given in the face of the tissue of unique weaknesses. God, I think, is primarily interested in that support and that encouragement. Down inside, in the nasty and cynical part of my character, I don't think God cares much whether the Episcopal Church as such lives or dies. I do think God cares deeply about whether Episcopalians and those this community touches support each other in love, whether we understand the institutional aspects of the church as being there to enable the giving of gifts to each other through the image of God in each one of us. I suspect that's what is cared about.

I've gone on long enough this morning about little enough. You'll just have to figure out the temptations of Jesus for yourself.

Please stand for the creed.