

Proper 29 B

Collect for Proper 29, BCP p. 236 Revelation 1:4b-8

A quick look at the collect first. The pivot concept in it seems to be a movement from division and, presumably chaotic division, into some kind of ordered relationship. First, all the epithets of God, and then, “. . . grant that the peoples of the earth, . . . may be freed and brought together. . .” This is the pivot concept of the prayer. The implication is that a freeing must precede the creation of effective unity.

Human beings have used different kinds of language to talk about what they need to be freed from. In Western traditions it's something called sin -- about which there have been agelong and acrimonious discussions. In Indic traditions, it's ignorance -- about which there have been agelong and hair splitting discussions. In Chinese traditions, people need to be freed from excessive autonomy. The question, the religious question, has become, “How can we create a community that works?” And the “how?” has been debated among a number of different schools of thought for 2500 years, at least. So, there is agreement among the great religious traditions that there is something we need to be freed from (and into). Whether it is sin or ignorance or an unrestrained focus on self, there is a universal agreement that something is wrong (and that it can be set right).

Now, as I occasionally tell my students: “Look, all religions are based on the sense that there is some kind of rift or fault that runs across human existence and religion is the means for responding to it.” Two things follow. First, religion is rather like an old, untended pasture with a luxuriant growth of weeds. You remember those cockleburrs that grow by the road side and in other disturbed soils and which have both hooked points and an incredible stickiness? When one walks through them, one discovers, sometimes much later, that one has become an unwitting carrier of weeds.

Religion tends to become an unwitting carrier of weeds. We walk through the fields of our lives and, because religion is so powerful and can take us so far, because it is a response to the fundamental rift where all our grief begins, it tends to collect, sometimes unconsciously, all kinds of other things, extraneous to its basic purpose, that of mending this universally experienced rift across life.

That's the first thing: religion tends to gather hangers-on in spite of and in tension to its true mission. Frequently this takes the form of claims that God sanctions one's particular cultural norms. Consider all the norms for which divine sanction has been claimed and later rejected: slavery, the subordination of women, the immorality of taking interest on loans, all the special class structures humans have invented to justify the holding of power by some over many. God's sanction has even been claimed for the destruction of races and nations.

Part of struggling with one's faith is an ability to distinguish between its core purpose and something clinging to you from your walk through the meadow. That does not mean that all things acquired in your walk through the meadow are bad. The fact that this small group is down here worshiping in this basement, means that you don't have to have stained glass windows, vaulted ceilings, printed bulletins. These things can be very nice, but are also something we have acquired walking through the meadow. Stained glass windows are not the goal. Taken properly, they're nice enough pointers towards the goal, but not an end in themselves.

So the challenge is always, somehow, to come closer the core, to discard the inessential, to at least keep it in it's place, in proportion. It feels to me like a tightening spiral that brings us nearer and nearer to an understanding of what that central point is that needs mending. Only sometimes it doesn't feel as if it's tightening.

Second, a danger occurs in religions which forget that the reason they exist is because something is wrong. They lose their ability to confront the human condition in its depth and height, in its suffering and glory, in its self-centeredness and its love. And because they lose the ability to stand aside from culture and confront it they uncritically confirm what culture is. But the sense, in most Christianity, is that what's wrong is not easy to fix. It takes focus, it takes thought, and frequently a few other things such as community. It can also take the ability to detach from a particular community, to see its life under the aspect of eternity, under the judgment of a God who can admit no other goal than the good of the most ignored and least important members of every society. There is also a tendency to forget that we need to work on understanding what the problem is that needs fixing. I find it difficult to accept a solution for an undefined problem.

How do I know that the solution is a solution and not just a hole in the ground, until I know something about what the problem is? Religions without a critical component tend to treat human life in a shallow way. In human life, in institutional life, I see an amazing tendency to head straight as an arrow for the path which takes one around the problem. I see it in families who come for counseling and would rather talk about anything other than what is really bothering them. Sometimes, I'm just as glad to let them talk about anything – I don't want to talk about what's bothering them either. We also see this in congregations, in churches. The favorite bad boy in Episcopal Congregations of the past 20 or so years seems to be "There's something wrong with our communication." When I'm feeling a little on the sarcastic side, I want to say, "Why don't you want to talk to each other?" We do not fix our congregations until we fix ourselves. There's more here than meets the eye.

The Christian life consists of a balance, never forgetting that the purpose of Christianity is a healing purpose. This means we must pay attention to both disease and healer, problem and solution, failure and hope. To heal means that there is something to be healed. To propose Christ as the answer means there's a problem. To hope in God means that failure is a real possibility. We are not yet where we need to be. Part of Christianity is coming to terms with that, that we are not yet where we need to be, and then discovering, and this is where it gets dicey, what to do about it. How shall we respond to that discovery?

The reason this is tricky is that a good many of us are quite happy with guilt, in one form or another, or with our small goals, trivial aims and a God rarely rising above the mundane. One response is a near addiction to guilt, to a cultivated awareness that I'm not all right. The sure sign that something is spiritually pathological is to never move beyond guilt, to go around and around within it like a rock in a polisher. The point to the healing reality of Christianity is that problems are, in fact, understood and, if not solved, are creatively incorporated into life. And then one moves on. Do not be concerned. I guarantee you will never run out of problems. So why keep the same one? If chewing on problems is a satisfaction to you, don't worry, you might as well solve a few on the way and get on to something new. But there is a kind of response that goes around and around with the same things, not getting any deeper. That's the pathology of guilt.

Remember that the foundation of Christianity is the recognition of a rift cutting across human existence. I find myself convinced, that if not absolutely true in the form in which I currently accept it, Christianity is at least a useful platform. I find myself convinced that Christianity is true, not so much because of its analysis of what salvation looks like, as its analysis of the original human condition and the problems that go with that. I find myself respecting a religion that refuses an easy way out and asks us to face the depth of ourselves – even the depth of our rejection of God, of love, of life and which speaks to our enamoredness with death. I may not know how to face myself, but it is important to acknowledge that whether I can or not, it is what I'm called to do.

So, that's "the peoples of the earth, divided and enslaved by sin," and that's the Christian way of putting the basic problem, but the second part of the collect is "be freed and brought together under his most gracious rule." Now that word "rule" comes, in our culture, close to spoiling it. We don't like the idea of rule, partially because there is an assumed but unexpressed word preceding it, the word "arbitrary." Now in the Christian tradition, the rule of God is anything but arbitrary. One definition of God is that God is the only entity in the universe with no ax to grind, with no self interests to provoke arbitrary decisions. To put it in a different way, the only ax God has to grind is that which is best for each entity in the creation. This is what we mean when we say, "God is love." I sometimes find this language a bit difficult – the common way of putting it is that God loves us. That's OK. I'll use that, I won't gripe about it too much, just a little. This is a bit abstract, but it's important. God is not an entity to which love is attached. Love is not one of the cockleburs I was talking about earlier. God is love expressing itself outwards from a center. The distinction is between the possession of a characteristic and the nature of a being. In classical Christian thought, God does not possess love as a characteristic, love is the nature of divine being. Here we begin to catch a glimpse of the Christian position on dealing with this rift that cuts across our existence. The Christian proposal, take it or leave it, is that one must learn how to participate in that divine being which is not able to be anything but love for everything else in the creation.

So, when we find in the Revelation to John, "I am the alpha and the omega" we're not talking just temporally, but about a kind of love which surrounds, informs and, I hope, slowly shapes, reality. But we are not talking about a being who has characteristics and then uses those characteristics to change his relation to one or another of the independent beings in creation. I'm not saying that doesn't happen, but that isn't the fullness of the Christian picture. "I am the alpha and the omega" is not just temporal. It's the beginning and end also in the sense of being and meaning, and relating.

As we begin to participate in love so that it becomes that which shapes our being and our meaning and our relating, and shapes what we do with our memories of the past – God who was – informs our actions in the present – God who is – and it shapes our hopes – he who is to come, then I think we're some way towards dealing with the rift crossing human existence. The goal of Christianity is to help us slowly, deliberately, carefully, one thing at a time, shape an existence that participates in that kind of loving. The coming of Christ in Advent, which we are about to begin celebrating, is a looking for a means of bridging the gap between a human existence in which everything is touched by this rift and our participation in a love whose concern is the good of everything so touched.

That's all I have to say about that.

