

2nd Sunday after Christmas (Year C) 2010

Matthew 2:13-15, 19-

23

This is typical Matthew – who tried to tie his story of Jesus into the Old Testament, either by mirroring Old Testament events in his reports of Jesus, or by accounting for events he recorded by saying, “This happened in order that the prophets might be correct.” (As an aside, I always found this rather amusing. The prophets predicted an event, and then the event happened in order that the prediction might be correct. As a pragmatic, pre/post-modern person, I find myself wanting to say, “And where’s the meaning in that? Is God playing a game with us to convince us of something we won’t be convinced of on the basis of the events, – the evidence itself?”

The answer to that rests in the ancient view of history. Ancient people found themselves asking the question, “Does the human story have any meaning or is it chaotic?” Creating loops, whether prediction-fulfilment, dying-rising, seasons-to-seasons and back, was a way to give pattern, and therefore meaning to history. This question about meaning in the human story is still with us. There are large chunks of the Christian community which, although they would not be pleased with my putting it this way, believe that history is essentially without meaning. They believe that giving meaning to history will require a radical intervention by God. Folks who center Christianity on the second coming, on apocalyptic, tend to fall into this category. They think that God will have to intervene in the human story in some radical “apocalyptic” way in order to bring it to an acceptable conclusion. I suppose one could interpret their position as saying that human history does have meaning; that human beings mess things up more and more until God has to intervene to set them right. The only meaning of history without divine intervention is disaster.

This seems to me a weak-kneed understanding of the meaning of history. In fact, if you stop to think about it, you discover that the meaning isn’t in history at all, but instead in the divine intervention in it. History’s only purpose is to be broken by God’s power. I’m a bit skeptical about this understanding and believe it inadequate to the Christian picture. Here’s why. Let’s go back to today’s collect: “O God, who wonderfully created, and yet more wonderfully restored, the dignity of human nature . . .” Now one is on shaky ground these days in talking about human nature at all as anything more than a social construct, but I think I’ll risk it.

God first creates, then restores human nature. Whatever human nature is, it is something God values. Whatever the impact of sin, of the sum of evil in the human story, the doctrine of the Episcopal Church is that human nature can be restored through our response to God in history. The statement of restoration is in the past tense. It has already happened and now history has meaning because within history, God has restored the dignity of human nature in and by means of Christ. Our task is to live out of that restoration. The collect doesn’t say that human nature is a neutral thing. It says that God created and restored human nature with “dignity.” I don’t see how human nature could have dignity without also having meaning within history.

The petitionary clause of the collect is “Grant that we may share the divine life of him who humbled himself to share our humanity . . .” When we think about human nature, as people who

gather in this community to relate to God using these specific forms of worship, the objective is not for us to be spectators in a world constantly declining to a point at which God will need to radically interfere to set things right, but for those of us who gather here, our Christianity consists of acknowledging that God's objective is to enable our human nature to share divine life. That's the objective.

This form of Christianity, despite your chaplain's tendency to a bit of cynicism, is hopeful. It makes the claim that human beings are capable, in and by means of their lives, of reflecting to themselves and to the world who God is. That's what the collect means when it says, ". . . grant that we may share the divine life . . ." That's what we ask for. It seems to me to make no sense to pray for things which we could not receive. The church asks us to pray for the divine life. That means our human nature is capable of being transformed into Christ's human nature.

Inside the Episcopalian tradition, we pray for things which we may receive and incorporate into our own being. If the collects of The Book of Common Prayer ask us to pray to share the divine life, then in the official teaching of the Episcopal Church, that's what human beings need to be about – attempting to share the divine life.

Here I need to make an important distinction. There is a huge difference between sharing and owning. Frequently, in the history of Christianity, the world has been understood in terms of owning or not owning. When one needs something one has to beg for it, because someone else, perhaps even God, owns it. I see this in families. One member of the family calls the tune, is always right. In order to act, other family members need to beg for permission. This is not sharing. It is not mutual support. Sometimes it even happens in the church. I'm occasionally around a corner and hear things I wasn't intended to hear, "I wonder if we could do thus and so. We'd better ask Father." Father is the person who owns the church so that other people associated with it have to beg in order to act.

Sometimes one does have to ask a person who has authority through knowledge, skill or experience. But there is a difference between asking to share the fruit of knowledge, skill or experience, and asking for permission because someone else has power and I do not. The life of the Christian community is to be shaped by the sharing of gifts. We share divine life, divine gifts with each other. We don't own it. No one in the Christian community has power simply by right. If a person in the Christian community is to have power, they have it either because of knowledge or experience or even because they have a special gift from the spirit that enables them to do particular things well. Authority without loving purpose and shared creative goal leads to abuse.

The picture I'm painting is utopian. However, occasionally it's good to remember utopian pictures or we may find ourselves unable to imagine heaven, and that would be sad. It pays to spend time expanding our sense of what we're capable of receiving. What, after all, is this human nature that God has restored in Christ, and how are we doing at receiving it? Asking this question is one part of achieving spiritual maturity. A characteristic of immaturity is the lack of ability to receive gifts. One must learn how to receive gifts gratefully before one can be an adult Christian. Let me illustrate from the educational world. I tell my students, "If you will read my exams carefully 25% -30 % of the answers are located somewhere in the text. Can you find

them?” Even though the answers are pretty obvious, many students cannot find them. I’m attempting to give them something, and they have not yet been taught in ways that allow them to receive the gift. You’ve got to be able to receive the gift in order to make use of it.

The same thing is true of the spiritual life. The ability to receive God’s gift of a restored dignity in human nature is something we need to practice with imagination. That capacity doesn’t just come without any effort. This is what the collect is about. Let me read it one more time: “O God, who wonderfully created, and yet more wonderfully restored, the dignity of human nature: Grant that we may share the divine life of him who humbled himself to share our humanity. . .”

If our humanity is capable of sharing the divine life, then it is capable of expressing it. This sharing and expressing of the divine life is, for the Christian, grounded in human nature, and not in any race, people, tribe, church or theological position. Nor is it confined to any particular religion. God’s attempt to restore the dignity of human nature is not limited to the dignity of Christian nature. If it were, the collect would say so.

Notice that in today’s Gospel Jesus crosses all sorts of boundaries. The reason Matthew has Jesus go down into Egypt is that he needed to imitate Moses. Then, since Moses came out of Egypt, Jesus had to come out of Egypt too. Later on Jesus climbed a mountain. Except when he climbed the mountain, he did Moses one better. Moses climbed a mountain and was told, at the summit, what the law was. Jesus climbed a mountain, and, at the summit, told everyone what the law was. So Matthew told this story to develop his parallelism between Jesus and Moses. After all, he was dealing with a community of Jewish converts to Christianity. He needed to establish the superiority of Jesus.

We can use the story for other purposes. A good piece of literature is not limited in its meaning to what its author believes he or she is doing. There is more in a good piece than the author knows is there. The same is true of the gospels. In this case, I think it’s Jesus’s crossing of boundaries: going into and living in Egypt (outside the boundaries of the Promised Land), and then returning, not to his first home, but to another home in an area, which to good Jews was suspect. Galilee was a border community, a place where cultures mixed, a place of which proper Jews were quite suspicious. “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” (John’s Gospel)

We know that the intellectual Jews from Jerusalem thought the Jews of Galilee were rural, marginal and of questionable education and orthodoxy. The economic boom of the first century had done good things for Galilee, so it was wealthy but not recognized as a devout or orthodox region.

Jesus crossed the border between the promised land and the world. He lived in strange places where God’s word and the world confronted each other. The agent for the restoration of the dignity of human nature tends to show up in places in which human nature is not usually allowed much dignity. Later on we see him consorting with a woman rejected even by heretic Samaritans, with another who came from the enemies of Israel (the Syro-Phoenicians), with another who performed the slave’s work of washing his feet, with a tax collector, with a retired Roman soldier. All over the border from the holy. That’s where the restoration of the dignity of

human nature took place. This is an important thing to remember about Jesus's story.

That's all I have to say about that, please stand for the creed.