

Love and Death

The angel said to the women,
“Do not be afraid
Go and tell Jesus’ disciples,
He has been raised from the dead” ...
So they left the tomb quickly...
Suddenly Jesus met them and said, “Greetings!”
“Do not be afraid; Go and tell my brothers
To go to Galilee: there they will see me.”

Many of us are struck by the stunning power of Jesus’ words, his ethical teachings — love others as you love yourselves; do likewise, as did the good Samaritan — so that we hardly notice that we would not have these teachings, these words, would not have the gospels that contain them, would not have Jesus in our lives, that there would be no Christian faith at all, had the disciples not experienced what we call the Easter event. Easter, with the word east in it: the east, where the sun rises, warms us through the day, allows there to be light and life. So let us think this morning of that first Easter day, three days after Christ’s crucifixion, where the gospels report that Jesus appears to the women, and instructs them to tell the disciples to go to Galilee where they, too, will see him. And indeed, the gospels record that the disciples did see Jesus in Galilee, as, also, Paul’s letter records that he saw Jesus on the road to Damascus. So our faith is grounded in seeing, but also, and this is a bit odd, in not seeing. For in Luke’s gospel, where we are told of Jesus meeting the disciples in Galilee, that Jesus walks with them, and talks to them, but he appears as a stranger to them, until they sit at table and Jesus breaks bread, and only then do they see him, only then do they recognize that this stranger is no stranger at all, that it is Jesus, their risen lord. So what are we to make of this seeing and not seeing. On the most immediate level, we should not feel badly about our faith if we go for long periods of time without sensing Jesus’ presence in our lives. For even the disciples did not recognize his presence. though Jesus was there with them. And that is the case with us. Jesus is there with us, even when we have no sense of his presence. But when he is with us, when we sense he is with us, even if that sensing has happened only once in our lives. or in the life of someone we love, that sensing of presence is as vivid and compelling as when the risen Jesus walked amongst the disciples, convincing them that he was alive, manifesting, or perhaps I should say, revealing, a new depth of spirit. Jesus called himself the Son of Man, though the meaning of that term is not clear. The church, after centuries of thought, came to think of him as the second person of the Trinity. But we think of him as our lord, not because of his titles. not even because of his ethical teachings, for Jesus is not simply an ethical teacher, Jesus is primarily to be understood as the bearer of new being: meaning that when we open ourselves to him, he transforms our being: our being now has Christ’s spirit in us. And that tells us why, in this morning’s resurrection account, there is so much insistence on being not afraid. The angels tell the women who came to the tomb,”Do

not be afraid.” Jesus’ opening words to the women are, “Do not be afraid.” So we need to ask ourselves, what is it about the risen Jesus that might frighten us. I would say it is precisely that Jesus is the bearer of new being, so that in opening ourselves to him, we are opening ourselves to be transformed, to letting Christ’s spirit into us — and transformation is frightening because we do not know where it can lead us. And this is why the Good Samaritan story can be a frightening story. For when we read it not as a story of a foreigner helping a wounded Israelite, but as Jesus telling us to do likewise, commanding us to help the wounded, a command even the best of us cannot fully obey — for there are so many that are wounded, and the dominant concern of our lives is, first and foremost, to care for our loved ones. Somewhere in our consciousness, though it may be buried deep, we know our failings, we understand only too well why our faith tells us that our existence, human existence, is fallen existence. We are fallible. We are not only physically fallible, we are morally fallible.

There’s another change our faith leads us to that we should not be afraid of. For our Easter faith, which contains within it Good Friday, is, at its depth, a vision of humility. For our lord, the one whom we confess as God’s son, the second person of the trinity, is hoisted upon the cross, dies, is buried, and lies dead in the tomb for three days. The one who was believed to be the messiah, the one who was believed to bring in God’s kingdom on earth, has died an ignominious death, nailed to a cross, like a common criminal. And God lets this happen. Whatever happened to the power of God? Or rather I should say, this is what good Friday teaches us about the power of God. It teaches us to avoid the idolatry of thinking of God as if God were an absolute monarch, of attributing to God the attributes of power that belong exclusively to the Caesars of the world; it teaches us that it is a mistake to think of God as if he were a wrathful king, judging and punishing his offending subjects, condemning them even to eternal hell. For the cross discloses God’s saving power not as omnipotence, not as coercive power, but as suffering love, as compassionate presence, as forgiveness. It teaches us that our faith lies in the power of forgiveness and love, not in physical and political force, that Grace is the power of God, and that grace is a tender element of the divine spirit, that Christian faith deifies goodness, not power. When Paul says we are justified by faith not works, when Luther talks about justification by God’s grace through faith, they are moving our thinking away from power, from penal justice, towards compassion, towards forgiveness, towards healing, redemption of the soul. For God’s righteousness is a gracious and forgiving love. There is judgment in God’s forgiveness, and that judgment is real, for we are unworthy; and in our acceptance of God’s forgiveness, there is an acknowledgment of God’s judgment upon us, an acknowledgement of our unworthiness. But our response to God’s judgment is, of course, more than acknowledgement, it is even more than repentance, it is gratefulness, it is thankfulness, and that gratefulness, that thankfulness, creates the church, a community of the grateful, drawn to worship our gracious God, gathering together to show our gratitude that God’s final word to us is a merciful word, a word of love, that God is not only our creator, not only our moral commander, but, most wonderfully of all, God is our redeemer, the forgiver of our sins, the healer of our souls. So, let us give thanks...

Thanks be to God. Thanks be to Christ. Amen.