

Proper 24, Year B
October 20, 2024

As I began to dig out the mysteries of today's readings, I awaited the arrival of someone who has questions about the Episcopal Church. My first thought is to send him to the Catechism, found towards the back of our Book of Common Prayer, a sort of Anglican Call and Response: What are we by nature? What do we learn about God the Father? What is the Old Covenant? What are the Ten Commandments? What is sin? What is redemption? Who is God the Son? What is the New Covenant? What are the creeds? Who is the Holy Spirit? What are the Holy Scriptures? What is the Church? Who are the ministers of the Church? What is prayer? What is worship? What are the sacraments? What is Holy Baptism? What is Holy Eucharist? What is the Christian Hope?

All great questions and ones that we will perhaps begin to address in a Lenten Adult Formation series in the spring.

The Catechism addresses questions dating as far back to the time of the Apostles, the students of Jesus who, after his death and resurrection, were given assignments by the Holy Spirit: to continue in fellowship, the breaking of bread, following and sharing Jesus' teachings, receiving more into the community by baptizing in Jesus' name. Our Catechism is a sort of house-cleaning of what has evolved as The Church over centuries, a clean-up of the battle fields where family members, friends, nations were pitted against one another over what Jesus really said, what it meant, how to write it so that everyone understood and believed the truth, who really had the truth; and we continue to battle – "schisms" as many of our hymn texts are fond of saying – and each brand of Christianity has its own slightly different version of these questions and answers.

My thoughts keep getting interrupted by this morning's words from Isaiah, 5 or 6 centuries before Jesus, one of not a few passages in Isaiah which describes in vivid detail the "Suffering Servant." Because we are Christian, our minds immediately jump to the conclusion that Isaiah is describing Jesus. More accurately, he is describing what Messiah will be like: a prophet speaks the words God gives him or her to speak, and Isaiah is as

much a prophet of Judaism as Christianity, and for Jews today, Messiah has not yet come.

Putting aside the countless councils of the Church over the centuries which attempted to define and codify what the church is, isn't what it all comes down to is the Suffering Servant? Isn't that what Christianity is? Not the "gospel of prosperity" or if you don't believe as I do, you're going to hell. Scripture – from cover to cover – is the story of human beings, created by a God who loved them even before they were born, running away from this God every chance they get, forgetting about God, forgetting about anything but themselves - running astray, everyone to his own way - getting into deep trouble, then running back to God for forgiveness (are you really sorry or just embarrassed because you got caught?), being forgiven by the God of love, feeling grateful and loving God for a few minutes and then going out and messing up all over again. God sends his son to show us what's what, how we should behave, that love is the new covenant and then – just as in the parable - we commit the ultimate crime of murdering him. What we didn't realize at the time was that that was God's plan all along: God knew we were going to eliminate Jesus. The message from God to us is no matter what you've done wrong, Jesus took your messes, your mistakes on to himself and willingly died to make up for them, to atone for them.

Isaiah says this Messiah has taken on our flaws, our inconsistencies, our sinful nature and though we assumed God had struck him down, Messiah willingly invited the punishment that was to be ours, I suppose one could say he asked for it: the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, afflicted, led to the slaughter and killed. But out of his anguish, he sees the light: by giving up his life, he has given righteousness, or the chance to be in right relationship with God, to all of us, hopeless sinners that we are.

Christians believe that the Messiah Isaiah is talking about is Jesus Christ, the 100% human/100% divine only Son of God, who lived in this world as one of us yet did not sin. Jesus did not come into the world to condemn the world, but through him – because of him - the world would be saved.

From the time Jesus entered the world as one of us, he turned us on our heads: an infant born into poverty rather than a family distinguished by a history of temple royalty, a man who loved to eat and drink with low-life, a teacher who seemed not only to re-interpret the Law but to break it, a man who claimed authority reserved for God alone. Some expected a wealthy descendant of Aaronic priests, some expected a renegade who, after much bloodshed, would unseat the Roman occupation, some were hoping for a reincarnated King David – ruddy-faced and handsome - or the return of the prophet Elijah, who as far as anyone knew had never died. But what they got - what we got - was Jesus who came back from the dead, and in so doing showed us all that suffering and death are not the final answer. The risen Lord, the exact image of God, the only Son of God, the living God, the loving God. The Suffering Servant. The text of a hymn left behind in the 1940 Hymnal expresses this all so beautifully:

Dost Thou in a manger lie, who hast all created,
Stretching infant hands on high, Savior, long awaited?
If a monarch, where Thy state, where Thy court on Thee to wait?
Royal purple where? Here no regal pomp we see; naught but need and
penury;
Why thus cradled here?

"Pitying love for fallen man brought me down thus low...
For a race deep lost in sin, came I into woe...
By this lowly birth of mine, sinner, riches shall be thine,
Matchless gifts and free. Willingly this yoke I take, and this sacrifice I make,
Heaping joys for thee."