

Genesis 17:1-7
Psalm 22:23-31
Romans 4:13-25
Mark 8:31-38

SERMON 2/25/24

THE LIGHT OF FAITH By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

“I am the light of the world. The one who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life.”

I was reading an essay the other day by a sixteenth Century Frenchman named Montaigne, and I came across something he said about the relationship between virtue and natural goodness that really struck me. He pointed out that we don't really think of somebody who's just naturally warm and generous and caring and loving as being virtuous, because goodness so completely fills their nature that they're not even tempted towards any other course.

We reserve the concept of virtue, Montaigne pointed out, and this seemed to me to be clearly true – for cases where some temptation or countervailing desire is overcome; the virtuous are not those who naturally and completely do the right thing, but rather those who have overcome something in themselves that would draw them in another direction, and who nonetheless do the right thing.

And in reading today's gospel selection, it occurs to me that the same distinction might be drawn between trust and faith.

When a mother is walking with her little three year-old boy and they come to a street crossing, she puts her hand down and the little boy takes her hand for security, and together they walk across the street. That seems to be a perfect picture of trust. There is absolutely nothing in the little boy's nature that would prevent him from reaching up and taking his mother's hand, nothing that would make him hesitate or have second thoughts; there is no doubt in his whole little being; there is nothing in him to overcome.

Faith, on the other hand, is something that guides our behavior when there is an awareness of alternatives, when there is something in us that is drawn in a different direction. The picture I've used in the past is of someone clinging to the chimney of his house when the flood waters have risen and are roaring about him, and a would-be rescuer dangling from a helicopter reaches out a hand to him. The person must give up the security of his grip on the chimney in order to grasp the rescuer's hand. It is one or the other, it's a decision, it's a choice between viable alternatives. We may even put this by saying that faith is a virtue: it flows from the will, not simply from the heart.

The three synoptic gospel accounts tell us about a forty-day period that Jesus spent alone in the wilderness during which he is confronted by three temptations, and they are all temptations to use his divine power to accomplish his goals, rather than relying upon God's plan. Since he was alone during those forty days, Jesus must have later told his followers about them, and the image he later used to describe them was that of being tempted by Satan in the wilderness. And in talking about it to followers, Jesus said that at the end of the temptations he rebuked Satan, told Satan to be gone, to get behind him.

Our gospel selection for this morning describes something that happens much later, almost at the end of his earthly ministry. And once again Jesus uses the same imagery; only this time he uses it with reference to his dearest friend, his devoted follower, the leader of his chosen band of apostles. He says it to Simon Peter.

So let's read it together, and then think about what it means.

Mark 8: 31-38.

The temptations in the wilderness at the beginning of his ministry dramatically illustrated the triumph of Christ's own faith, his willful choice to choose the difficult way of God over the easy and tempting ways of the world. And now here, at the end of his ministry, we find Jesus re-experiencing the same trial of temptation. Now facing his own imminent and terrible death on the cross, now facing the apparent failure of all his efforts, the unmasking as pipe-dreams of all his instruction and promises, Jesus once again is offered the temptation, this time by his own best friend, of choosing another way, of choosing the way of the world.

And his response to Peter now reiterates his response then, echoes the first triumph of his willful faith in the wilderness: "Get behind me, Satan!" he tells Peter. "For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

And then, and here's what's important for all of us, he turns to the other disciples, and to all the others gathered there those who were not yet his disciples, and he tells them that what was required of him, is also required of them. They must choose His way, however dark and difficult and even hopeless it might seem.

And what is that way? It is the way of faith. For Jesus himself, it was faith in God. And for us? For us, it is faith in Jesus. And what is that faith? It is the willful choice to follow Him, whatever the worldly cost.

For his first followers, that worldly cost would be enormous, and Jesus was often brutally honest in describing it to them.

He once said: ³⁴ *“Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword. ³⁵ For I have come to ‘set^[a] a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law’; ³⁶ and ‘a man’s enemies will be those of his own household.’* (Matthew 10: 34-36)

He once said: *18 “If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you. 19 If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. 20 Remember the word that I said to you, ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you. (John 15: 18-20).*

And here again, in our Gospel selection for today, he lays before them a choice: it is the choice to set behind them the ways of the world, and set before them the ways of heaven. And it is a difficult choice, because following Christ is so often fraught with danger, failure, and disappointment. Why then should anyone make that choice? Why should anyone choose the narrow rather than the wide gate; why should anyone choose the promise of another reality rather than the certainty of the one that surrounds us right now?

The light of reason cannot supply the answer, because the choice must be guided by a different kind of light: the light of faith.

And what does that mean for us? Times have changed since Jesus painted the choice for his first followers in such harsh and terrible terms. At least in our civilization, which is largely Christian at its heart, even if these days it doesn't often think of itself that way, at least in our civilization, we do not risk martyrdom

or the rejection by our families or the persecution by political authorities for professing belief in Christ.

But I think Christ's message goes deeper than that. His true message, I think, can be summed up this way: the worldly consequences of choosing to follow Christ, whatever they might be, pale into insignificance compared with the heavenly consequences of doing so.

As we have argued many times from this pulpit, Jesus did not come to teach us how to achieve success in this world; he came to teach us how to begin to prepare ourselves for success in the world to come. He did not come to echo the wisdom of the world; he came to reveal the wisdom of God. He did not come to light our way out of worldly difficulties; he came to light our way to heavenly peace.

The true message of our passage is that, whatever the worldly consequences of choosing to follow Christ's instructions, of choosing to model one's life after His, whether those consequences be good or bad, blissful or horrific, they pale in comparison to the heavenly consequences.

"I am the light of the world," Jesus said on another occasion. "The one who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life." And what He meant was that the one who follows Him shall not walk in heavenly darkness, but in heavenly light, shall see the heavenly value of things, shall learn the heavenly highways and byways, shall cast heavenly shadows on the things and people of this world.

And so our prayer for this morning and for this message, heavenly Father, is that you open our earthly eyes to your heavenly light, that you accustom our hearts to the warmth of heavenly radiation, that you inspire our human spirits to walk by faith and not by sight, so that with the eyes of our hearts being enlightened; we may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, We pray for the faith that convinces us to let go of the security of the chimney, and grasp the hand of the one who reaches down to us from above, Your beloved Son and our beloved Savior, Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray.