

Leaders

Today's readings, the first from the Book of Acts, the second from the Gospel of John, are, for your rector, balm for the soul!

I know that from time to time some of you may roll your eyes and wonder if Fr. David has gone off the rails with all this talk about non-violence or wonder if your Rector is a communist for all this talk about redistribution of wealth, or opening our doors to whomever, even the smelly, even the broke, even the strangest, among us.

So it is that I find in these lessons a comfort, and an inspiration.

One of the first things Jesus' apostles did after the resurrection of the Lord was to appoint a twelfth apostle; someone who was with Jesus throughout his ministry, someone who witnessed the resurrection.

It's so important to replace the spot that Judas vacated because the twelve represent the original twelve tribes of Israel, twelve tribes that God had created.

Those twelve tribes were always intended to be a people set apart; not because they needed to keep clean, but because they were to be a model for the world of how people are intended by God to live with one another.

And God set this up in very concrete terms.

Money is not to be loaned at interest.

Parents are to be honored.

Respect for one another's things and intimate relationships is required.

Fields are not to be harvested to the bare ground; but the leavings are to be left for the poor.

And every fifty years, all lands are returned to their original owners and all debt is wiped out.

How's that for some mighty radical stuff?

How's that for an egalitarian society?

That's the people the twelve tribes of Israel were called to become; and in the resurrection of Jesus, in the new life that danced out of that grave by the power of the finger of God, that is the new creation that Jesus begins here, now; it is the new creation for which the twelve apostles are the symbolic heads.

And that's the role of your church leaders today, to point to, to encourage, to plant, together with you, the seeds of the new reality that is the Kingdom of God.

Such is the heart and soul of Jesus' intimate prayer to the Father for all and each of us.

"They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world."

This intimate, whispered prayer of Jesus, that they, and we, remain **in** the world, but not **of** the world, gets to the very core of what God intends in raising up Israel to be a sign of God's way of living; it is a way of living that exists in deep and radical trust in the goodness and faithfulness of God.

It is a life that by its very nature invites controversy, invites pushback.

“I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world.”

And perhaps this is where so many churches have taken, over the years, the wrong path: a path that tries to make the church just another club, rather than the model community it is called to become.

Too often, our churches become apologists for the existing order, rather than prophetic voices.

And yet....

There is these days, it seems, a rustling, a powerful breath moving through our holy places and among the holy people of God, calling you and me back to the way that is the way of God: forming us to become the people Jesus dreamed we might become: a welcoming people, a peaceful people, a generous people.

That transformation needs to be rooted or it will not last.

Root it, therefore, in the resurrection.

Root it in the creeds.

The resurrection is God’s “yes” to the strange, counter-intuitive ways of God spoken to us by his Christ.

Without the resurrection, Jesus is just another well-meaning, but probably badly mistaken philosopher/poet.

Resurrection is God’s “yes” to all that Jesus teaches, to all that Jesus criticizes, to all that Jesus beckons us to become.

And the creeds, far from being ancient relics that we recite to stifled yawns and ill-disguised boredom are in fact the deeply embedded roots that give life to this Way of Jesus Christ.

Someone asked me not long ago, “Well, what do Episcopalians believe?”

It’s right there, in the creeds.

The creeds point the way, in these changing times, to the true world, the world now being created, the world that joins together heaven and earth!

Many of you, I am sure, know the “story of a church history professor at Yale Divinity School who invited an Orthodox priest to be a guest lecturer in his class.

The priest was as dry as one of Ezekiel’s bones; droning on and on about the most obscure details of the history of the ancient creeds of the church.

And toward the end, as the class is aching to be put out of its misery, a particularly earnest student raises his hand with a question:

“Father Theodore, what can someone do when he finds it impossible to affirm certain tenets of the creed?”

The priest looked confused.

“Well, you just say it.”

“It’s not that hard to master.”

“With a little effort, most can learn it by heart.”

“No, you don’t understand,” the student responded, “what am I to do when I have difficulty affirming part of the creed – like the Virgin Birth?”

Still looking confused, the priest said, “You just say it.”

“It will come to you eventually.”

By then the student has gone from being earnest to being frustrated and pleaded,

“How can I with integrity affirm a creed in which I do not believe?”

The old priest takes a step back in shock.

“It’s not YOUR creed, young man!” says the priest.

“It’s OUR creed.”

“Keep saying it for heaven’s sake!”

“Eventually, it may come to you.”

“For some, it takes longer than for others.”

“How old are you?”

“Twenty-three?”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself.”

“There are lots of things you don’t know at twenty-three.”

“Eventually, it may come to you.”

“Even if it doesn’t, don’t worry.”

William H. Willimon, “Formed by the Saints,” *Christian Century* 113, #5 (Feb. 7-14, 1996), 137.

The Creed, OUR creed, is the signpost of a new world order.

Pray it, meditate on it, struggle with it, and eventually, it will come to you.

Just as the resurrection is God’s “yes” that no matter the seeming futility of life; the apparent insistence of humankind to run from who we are meant to become; that God will not be frustrated; that life will indeed be raised out of death; just so the Creeds are deep roots into the very heart of our faith.

And as our witness to all of this today, we shall now baptize into our ancient faith three children, who with water and oil and the Holy Spirit, now join in the long line of Saints, scattered over the earth, who plant seeds of the kingdom, who have eyes to see and ears to hear, and mouths to speak of the marvelous deeds of God.

+amen