

## A WORLD OF LOVE

*“For we walk by faith, not by sight”* NRSV. II Corinthians 5:7

The Christians in Corinth, a Church founded by Paul, had started off with a great deal of enthusiasm and had given Paul a great deal of satisfaction. But after Paul had left them for a while things started to get difficult and they were beset by difficulties of one kind and another. So they write a long letter to Paul full of complaints. They want to know what good is their faith if it does not get rid of their troubles. I think that we have a great deal of sympathy with them. Even though they believe, they still seem to have all the troubles that beset ordinary mortals – and they don't think that is fair. Paul, who has had his share of problems and difficulties, gives an answer, which boils down to an explanation of what “faith” really is. If they were looking for an easy and cushioned life they did not understand what it meant to live by faith. So, what does it mean to live by “faith”? I would like to try to see if we can grasp what it is that Paul understood by “living by faith”.

When Columbus sailed off into the West there were those who thought that he was not only foolish but also living very dangerously. They fully believed that the world was flat, and if you sailed westward you would have to come to the very edge of this world and then drop off into oblivion. They saw their world as one that was like a plate with an edge over which you would drop into a bottomless abyss. Columbus saw the world differently. He believed in the Copernican view of the World. The world was a sphere, and if the world were round then if you launched off into the west you would have to return to where you began your journey.

So the way in which you view your world has consequences for what you do in it. The picture of the world you have determines your actions profoundly. Of course, the way in which he pictured the world did not give Columbus a detailed knowledge, or indeed any knowledge, of what he was about to encounter, but it did give him a way of dealing with the unexpected and a way of meeting difficulties as he met them.

In much the same way we have an understanding of our daily lives in our little world and this determines the way we behave and look at things that happen to us. I have a very good friend, a professor of Biology (not at Colgate), who when he looks at a hedgerow sees all kinds of plants that he can identify and name. I can stand by him and look at the same piece of ground and see a few straggly weeds and a lot of grass and bushes. He is a “whiz” at plant identification. The trouble with my friend, however, is that he is like that in dealing with everything he does in his life. He has to identify everything and give it a name and allocation. Everything has to have its place and to be in its place before he is able to deal with it. Any problem that he faces has to be thoroughly classified and clarified before he can really set about taking it in his stride and find a solution for it. For him the world is a system of discrete things that can be named and placed within a system of interrelated things. In other words the world is for him very little more than an object to be studied.

This way of looking at the world has profound consequences for the way in which he lives. Where you or I might see a beauty in a sunset he sees photo magnetic variations that impinge upon a highly sensitive nerve system. Beauty is lost in the midst of a barrage of scientific names and details. What I want to stress is the fact that it is the way in which we picture, understand, view ourselves in our world that determines the way in which we live in the world and understand what happens to us in this world.

This is what Paul is trying to tell the Christians of Corinth. The way they understand themselves within their world has consequences for the way in which they live and thus has consequences for the way in which they accept both pain and joy.

The kind of understanding we have of ourselves and our world makes a big difference in the way in which we act and feel. It makes a fundamental difference whether you believe that there is a god or not. To know a God-forsaken world is to know a world in which there is no purpose beyond death, no joy that surpasses pain, no mercy unless we give it. It is to believe in a world in which the past and the future have very little meaning for us as we scratch the dirt to plant today's food. It is to believe in a world in which conscience is nothing more than our parent's wishes writ large before us, and meaningless as anything but a guide from half-baked memories of a distorted past. It is to believe in a world in which our joys are our pleasures of the moment, passing with no lasting presence except in bitter memory. It is to believe in a world that is

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encompassed and extinguished by death, for the world we endow, no hope beyond our own feeble expectation that momentary ecstasy will last beyond the moment.

To believe in God, however, is to live in a world in which all we do and all we think and all we say has its setting within time which is engulfed in eternity, within a truth that lies always beyond us, and an awareness that we did not make ourselves but are creatures on this earth. We are not lords and masters of all we survey, but we are part of a world that has meaning and value beyond us. It makes a big difference whether the world is only there and we are only treading for a brief time upon its soil, or whether the world, in the words of Gerard Manley Hopkins, “is charged with the grandeur of God.”

Especially there is a difference if the God who made the world and us, sees us not merely as creatures he has made, but as his children. To see God as Father is to see him as a loving and caring creator. Jesus in crying out to “Abba Father” is not crying out to an alien destiny and uncaring fate beyond. The God he prays to, the God he tells us about, is the God who cares for the lilies of the field, how they grow, he cares for the birds of the air, and cares for us as his children. The God Paul portrays for us is the God that he has come to know through Jesus, and that is God who loves and cares enough to go to the utmost sacrifice so that we can understand what he is like.

Try to understand suffering and difficulty in this light, Paul tells us. If the world is filled with the grandeur of God, if God is the one who cares for the fallen sparrow, don't we have a very different understanding of difficulty, pain and suffering? The world is not an empty fateful void in which suffering has to be accepted stoically because there is no appeal to anything beyond this universe. To believe in the God that Jesus reveals to us is to talk of a power that made the universe, and beyond that, a power that loves and is concerned for us. The revealing power of the Cross is to be found in this power centered in Love. When, like the Corinthians, we think of troubles of the world as the burden of life, as the total encompassing of our lives, we are rooting ourselves in the world as the only meaningful thing in our lives. Affliction seen in this way is our own refusal to accept that there is anything beyond our own suffering selves. Suffering is our awareness of our limitation, and it can only be exorcised if we see that limitation is not a matter of fate, but of our place in the world as a creature of God, a part of God's own creation.

To see the world in this way, as part of God's created world, revealing his power, and also to see even more through the Cross and the Resurrection, that this power is a power of love in life and in death. What a difference it makes to our lives if we believe this, and not simply that we have no relationship to such a loving power.

Does it really make any difference, this believing that the World is in the hands of a loving, caring God? It would make very little real difference if all we were talking about were two different stories about the world. But we are talking about what is real and what is unreal. The reality of the Easter story for us is that it testifies to the reality of a world that is empowered by a loving God. Any other view is empty and worthless – is as Paul puts it, appearance, a chimera, unreal.

To live in this real world of loving power, then must make a difference. If for us this is the truth about our lives, then we can live a loving life with assurance, despite all the difficulties and the pain and the disappointments that might face us. For in the end we know that all things work together for good. Or in the words of Meister Eckhart, the mystic: “A man should orient his will and all his works to God and having only God in view go forward unafraid, not thinking, am I right or am I wrong?” To know that we live in the power of love is to accept that love as the way of our life. And acting upon that power we act with an assurance of that power.

Also, because the world is a world empowered by love, we are willing to act with strength of purpose. We are willing to try the way of love, even though there are doubters in our midst, because the world is this kind of a world, that weighting consequences does not stack up against the simple act of love.

The life lived in a world empowered by a loving God is also a life of freedom. The life so lived is not one lived in a world bound by law determining our every action, like the world of the priest in the Good Samaritan story, but a determination of a new spirit, the spirit of understanding what kind of being made the world we live in. If it is a God of love, then we are determined by the nature of that love, and that will flow

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freely from our spirit as we move about the world in our relations with other people. Our actions are determined by what seems good and loving, rather than by some compulsion from within or without.

To be rooted in this world empowered by a loving god is to know what kind of action is called for – and it is never hateful action, never spiteful action – always action of love and concern. And it is concern not only for our fellow humans, but a concern for the physical world itself. It is God's world, placed in our care. Gerald Manley Hopkins in a poem of praise to the grandeur of God and his World, contrasts the wonder and the beauty of the world with the human toil forced by those who have not seen this beauty. He says:

Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;  
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil  
And wears man's smudge and shared man's smell: the soil  
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;  
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;  
And though the last lights off the black West went  
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs-  
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent  
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

Whatever the darkness that we humans have brought to the world we can still see in the bright dawn the signs of God's loving care and concern. The darkness around the Cross is banished by the glory of the Easter morning, for it is the heart of our message, that the world is a world in which God's love reigns. And we live in love and concern both for that world and the people in it.

Paul chides the Corinthians that they do not really understand the nature of suffering until they see what he has seen: that suffering must be placed within the understanding of the world as one "in which the Holy Ghost broods with warm breast and with bright wings." This is our world – and God be praised.

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