

Trinity XII (18 August 2024)

“...for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life.”

+In the Name...

Earlier this week I met up with a friend from college. We were very close for those three years (He was a year ahead of me), but have largely lost touch in the years since he graduated. The meeting was prefaced by the information that he has been going through something of a spiritual crisis. I regret to admit that I was not too bothered by this admission at first, because in the time I have known him his life has been one continual spiritual crisis after another. He was raised Roman Catholic, but by the time I met him in college he never darkened the door of a church except when he was home on break and his parents made him go. When talking with him one would have surmised that Christ was not a part of his life. Then he found God and became an Evangelical. Then he found God again and became a Mormon. Then he found God again and went back to the Roman Church. The last I knew

he had joined a fundamentalist church in Virginia. That was about six years ago.

My heart broke as he told his story. After several years in this fundamentalist church, he left in disgust, apparently trapped in a quagmire of Calvinism. “You know,” he told me, “Calvinism is running rampant in American fundamentalism. It is even infiltrating parts of Anglicanism.” The second sentence surprised me more than the first, as Anglicanism is one of the few branches of the Church he has not tried. But that is making light of a very serious problem for this man. I do not know what his congregation taught, but he understood it to be that God caused all things to happen. Not just that God could make good out of it, but that God wants everything that happens to happen. I did not realize that was a tenet of modern American fundamentalism, but then that is not a subject I have ever been interested in pursuing.

It does seem to be part of a larger problem we have in this country of forgetting that God made each and every one of us with

free will. For the first time in my nearly two years as your priest I would like to quote the catechism of the Catholic Church. It sums up our belief succinctly: “God created man a rational being, conferring on him the dignity of a person who can initiate and control his own actions. God willed that man should be ‘left in the hand of his own counsel,’ so that he might of his own accord seek his Creator and freely attain his full and blessed perfection by cleaving to him.” Further, I should like to quote St. Irenaeus, a Church Father and bishop of an area in what is now France: “Man is rational and therefore like God; he is created with free will and is master over all his acts.”

While I do not doubt that my friend’s faith was tested beyond what he could handle when he came to believe that God was responsible for the bad things he saw in the world, our contemporary desertion of freewill goes beyond neo-Calvinist congregations. I have heard it asked, and indeed the thinking seems to have become more and more prevalent, why would God

have created a person in such and such a way if He did not want the person to act on those impulses.

There is a story: a man is dreaming one night and he meets Our Lord in front of a large warehouse. “What is in there?” asks the man, pointing toward the building. “Crosses,” replies Our Lord. “Crosses?” asks the man in bewilderment. “Yes,” replies Jesus. “Each person has his cross to bear, and those are ‘extras’, awaiting assignment.” “I have been meaning to talk to you about that,” says the man. “I have felt buried lately. There is so much to do, so little time. It is as though I can never catch up. My challenges exceed my talents. Would you please consider letting me exchange my cross for another?” Jesus seems hesitant, but replies, “Yes, you may.” Ecstatic, the man throws off his cross and hurries into the warehouse. It is indeed full of crosses, in every shape and size. “How is that one?” asked Jesus after the man tried on the first one? “Oh, much too heavy,” replied the man. Oddly enough, each cross seemed heavier than the prior one. After what

seemed like hours of trying on the different crosses, the man saw an inconspicuous looking one in the back corner. Quickly he ran for it and tried it on. Instantly he let out a sigh of relief. “Is that better?” asked Jesus. “Oh yes,” extolled the man. “This is much more like what I had in mind. I believe I can better face the obstacles in my life with only this cross to bear.” “That’s funny,” smiled Jesus wryly. “That is the cross you had when you came in here.” [Pause.]

In the Gospel according to Saint Matthew, Jesus says, “If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.” Each of us has a cross to bear. Our problem is that we get too focused on the creation and not enough on the Creator. I want this and so I must have it. It’s God’s fault for making me feel this way and want such-and-such. We beg for a change of circumstances, but what we really need is a change of attitude.

“God should not do things that he hates,” we say. Or “God has caused me to err.” (Read that as “God has caused me to sin.”) God does not make mistakes. It would go against his very nature of being omniscient. That being said, if Satan tempted Jesus during his forty days in the wilderness, why do we think that we would never have to face temptation ourselves? Let me pick a trite example. Let us say I like caramel apples. No, wait, I LOVE caramel apples. And not just any caramel apples, but especially the ones rolled in ground up Heath bars. I start by having one a day, then three each day. Then I start planning my life around them. I do not communicate with my friends or do things I used to enjoy because I am travelling far and wide to different orchards to get only the finest apples. I quit going to church and I miss work because I travel to Pennsylvania to get only the freshest Heath bars straight from the factory to grind up and put on my apple while the caramel is still hot before it has hardened. This ludicrous story could go on and on, but you see my point: I could

end without a position at this parish and my wife no longer talking to me because I became too focused on what I wanted and not what God wanted for me.

Yes, I could blame God for making me with a desire for caramel apples. But what about the person next to me who cannot play enough golf? What about the person who loves to read or go to the theatre? These all seem harmless enough, and in small doses are often benign. What about things that pop in our minds that we really are not sure where they came from? Things that do not seem good under any circumstances? Are we evil just because some abhorrent thought comes into our mind? No, that is Satan at work. He wants us to think we are evil because then we will identify with him and he is all too happy to welcome another devotee into his realm. This is why we pray during the Lord's Prayer, "Lead us not into temptation." God knows it is hard for us to fight temptation, so we pray for His help in avoiding it. But we

must continue to pray for His help in fighting when we are not able to avoid the temptation.

Listen to the words of Ben Sirach from today's Old Testament lesson at Morning Prayer: "For the wisdom of the Lord is great, and he is mighty in power, and beholdeth all things: And his eyes are upon them that fear him, and he knoweth every work of man." He knows every work of us, but He does not cause it. We choose what we do, and so we cannot blame God when we make poor decisions. In his second letter to the Corinthians from which we heard this morning, Saint Paul reminds us that the spirit gives life. Let us pray constantly for that life-giving spirit. Far from blaming God, let us give thanks for His abundant generosity, without which our lives would truly be hopeless, and instead of a heavy cross we would be weighed down with an insurmountable yoke. He loved us so much that He gave us the freedom to know, and to choose to do, what is right.



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