

Finding Faith in the Darkness – Brian Hartley

Isaiah 1:1, 10-20; Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16; Luke 12:32-40

For a good portion of the summer I have found myself immersed in sixteenth-century documents which provide many of the mundane details of worship in her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth's court. There are battles over music—whether it is appropriate to include instruments like viols and sackbuts on special occasions. There are squabbles over the behavior of the choir boys. And, in particular, there is the give and take regarding who is most appropriate to preach before the Queen during the annual Lenten round of sermons, as her advisers look for those young men who are articulate and promising but who won't attract the ire of a monarch known for her willingness to call speakers out whom she deemed to be abusing their preaching privileges. But perhaps the question that has dogged me the most as I have tried to stitch together the various fragments of theological, historical, and sociological data is the relationship between this beautiful daily round of worship and the very real problems that dogged the decades of the mid- and later-sixteenth-century Englishman as he sought to eke out an existence in a rather precarious time and place.

For instance, the year 1563 was the worst year of the plague in London with thousands dying in the capital and thousands more throughout the country side. As priests lit the torches that lined the urban squalor to try and burn away the miasma that it was believed caused the sickness, the Chapel Royal continued its regular round of daily prayer with young lads sounding forth in their most beautiful voices the words of the Te Deum or the Sanctus. And while rumors of excommunication swirled throughout the city, the Queen continued on about her regular duties dealing with both domestic and international crises, pausing occasionally for private prayer in her chambers or public prayer with her court. The political climate was rife with bad news, both at home and abroad, and yet people continued to gather to worship and to pray—especially the Crown, as if to suggest that immersing one's self in worship were, at best, an antidote and, at worst, a panacea to the ugliness of life taking place on the street.

Suffice it to say that I have come to believe that one of the most important roles of Christian worship is to offer us ***an alternative vision of the Kingdom***—perhaps most importantly during those times of deepest and darkest personal or corporate darkness. This extends beyond the typical verbiage we use when talking about whether we were “fed” by a service or whether, as many churches today might put it, we “had our needs met” by a particular Sunday worship service. This way of thinking, while perhaps partially perceptive in terms of what it means for us to be human, actually subjects God to our way of thinking—to our human categories. No, what I am talking about is ***God's inviting us into a new and different way of seeing the world***—of offering up for us a different language and a different set of lenses for thinking about whose and who we are. And, I would like to suggest that today's Scripture texts partake of this alternative vision.

In our opening lesson, the problem is one of total disjunction between worship and the hearers' way of life in the world. Unfortunately, the hyperbolic language used here by the prophet is oftentimes misread out of its historical and cultural context in a very literalistic way that would suggest that worship is somehow unimportant. But we know from the biblical canon that a great deal of time and attention is paid throughout the first Testament to the niceties of the priestly ritual. Anyone who has gotten bogged down in the later chapters of Exodus or the lengthy descriptive sections in Leviticus or Numbers can't help but wonder why so much time is spent on the description of worship furniture!

No, the problem here is not with the act of worship itself but with its disjuncture from a life of corporate integrity before the Lord God of Israel. The people had come to see worship on Mt. Zion as protection against their enemies—as a sign that God was always on their side. Yet, as Christopher Seitz points out in his article on Isaiah, “Zion is not an inviolable fortress offering sure defense against all foes. Zion is God’s own abode,” (*Anchor Bible Dictionary* 3: 487). And, as “God’s own abode,” the priestly worship was meant to beckon its hearers to a new way of living, a change in their orientation, not only towards God, but towards their neighbors, as well. That is why the middle section of the opening salvo in this book is a call for the people to not only ceremonially “wash themselves,” but to also “remove the evil of your doings” and to “seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow,” (Isaiah 1:16-17). Instead of living in two different worlds, the people are being called to live one integrated life where what they see, do, and practice on the Temple mount provokes them to a different way of living out their everyday lives.

This vision of faithful living is perhaps best summed up in our second lesson from Hebrews, where faith is defined as “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen,” (1:1). In a recent article in the New York Times, Gary Cutting, who teaches at Notre Dame, points out that many of his students see faith as something of a “trump card”—they view religion as a comfort and believe that having faith means “never having to explain why,” (<http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/08/01/philosophy-and-faith/>). But that is most certainly not what the author has in mind here. In fact, the word he uses which gets translated as “assurance” is *hypostasis*—perhaps one of the most heavily-debated words in the early church during the formulation of its creeds in the fourth and fifth centuries. Philip Hughes writing in his commentary describes this powerful word as “something that underlies visible conditions and guarantees a future possession.” He goes on to contend that “in striking contrast to the man whose values are entirely those of this present world, the Christian is animated by the conviction that it is the very things which are not (yet) seen, those things which he appropriates by faith, that are real and permanent,” (*A Commentary on Hebrews*, 440-441).

Faith, then, is not really a “trump card,” but something of a second sense which allows us to see and understand the world in a different way than our secular counterparts. F. F. Bruce claims that “physical eyesight produces conviction or evidence of visible things; faith is the organ which enables people to see the invisible order,” (*The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 279). In contrast to our penchant for thinking in terms of “blind faith,” there is actually a strong systemic foundation that

underlies the way Christians see the world that should form the basis on which we make choices. When we are called upon to make difficult decisions, we do not do so irrationally—we do so based on a set of foundational principles which underlie our entire orientation towards the world. These principles claim that there is a god and that that which he created is good. They also suggest that this god is not simply a giant clockmaker in the sky but continues to remain intimately involved in the world, calling people into fellowship with God's self and into fellowship with one another through God's primary instrument of redemption, the church.

The paradigmatic example which the writer uses here is Abraham whose entire life was built around a set of principles quite different from those of his contemporaries. He stood out not because he made irrational choices, but because he chose to build his life around a set of principles quite countercultural. His eyes, according to the book of Hebrews, were firmly fixed on a heavenly city and, as a result, he found himself something of a wandering nomad without a place of fixed residence and loyalties. In the stories that surround his life, we see him holding attachment to places rather lightly while his attachment to God grows ever stronger.

What animated Abraham was his longing for and commitment to "a better country." When the author says that "he set out, not knowing where he was going," he is not describing some character in "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest." Instead, he is describing someone whose entire life was centered around a godly vision based on a reality hidden deep within the created order. For Abraham, faith was not a "thing," a noun; no, for him, faith was a verb, something that demanded action—yielding to critical and somewhat difficult choices, in his everyday life. Yet, in a culture caught up with instant gratification, we are told that he "died in faith without having receiving the promises," (11:13). His life ended, then, based on this set of principles and beliefs that were yet to come to full fruition.

In Jesus' commands for preparation in today's gospel lesson we can hear some of this same desire to attach our lives to something of worth that may yet lie in the future. His command to sell possessions fits with the scriptures from the previous two Sundays which have called upon us to hold our material goods lightly. But today, we are given the further insight that "where your treasure is, there your heart will be also," (Luke 12:34). As I turn a year older here quite soon, I have begun to realize just how quickly the sands of time are draining away. We Baby Boomers have this tendency to believe that we will remain forever young, but mortality creeps up on us just as it has on previous generations. And like those previous generations we must begin to ask what kind of legacy we wish to leave behind.

One possibility is the commitment to hedonism and pleasure which I heard voiced last Sunday in an interview with Hugh Hefner, now 84 years of age. Clothed in his signature silk robe and surrounded by Playboy bunnies, he nevertheless is beginning to show his age. An icon to a certain set of presuppositions which challenged our culture a half century ago, he said, "I'd like to be remembered as someone who played an important part in changing the social-sexual values of my time." And, his dogged pursuit of those values remains his animating purpose in life as strongly at 84 as they did at 34.

I wonder if we, the followers of the one who walked the way of the cross, can be said to have lived our lives with as much singularity of purpose? What vision guides us, not just on those days when the sun shines brightly and all seems well with the world—but on those days when our world seems to be caving in and the corpses line the streets? What I have learned from my studies this summer and over the course of the last decade or so is the need for an alternate vision for God’s people through our worship and through our everyday choices that we make throughout the day. Though we may not be Elizabethans, we, too, are called upon to choose how we will live our lives each and every day. What role will prayer play? How often will we gather together? To what vocation and meaningful work are we called? How will we invest our resources of time, money, and focus? The drip, drip, of time marches on and each day we awaken to the beauty of a new dawn we have less time than we did the day before.

The temptations for conformity to this world and its all-too-apparent values can seem overwhelming. The calling to become, in the words of the writer to the Hebrews, “strangers and foreigners on the earth,” has little appeal to most of us. But, as Jesus reminds us: “where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” And, though worship may not be the only place we learn to realign our priorities, it has historically been the time and the space where we experience how God intends to “make right” the world. Every morning at prayer we learn that this begins with confession and repentance and concludes with thanksgiving. Letting these words roll off our tongues and conforming our bodies to these liturgical actions begins to shape us anew into people of faith, people whose hearts are fastened on those things “not seen.”

In his magisterial study, *The Cult of the Saints*, written two decades ago now, Peter Brown pointed out that the early church posited an entirely different understanding of the city than had the Romans. For the latter, there were tightly drawn parameters that separated men from women, slaves from free, and the living from the dead. But by late antiquity the emerging Christian society had provided access for women to positions of power as benefactors, leaders, and ascetics. In the pilgrimages that were beginning to places like Jerusalem, all classes of people freely mingled, breaking down previous social barriers. And bishops like Ambrose brought the bodies of the saints into the church, literally building places of worship over their bones and forever linking together heaven and earth in a new worldview previously unknown throughout the ancient world.

These Christians challenged the present order based on the hope rooted in their crucified and resurrected Lord. They were unafraid to confront the powers that be with a new vision, a heavenly vision, based on the principles of their Christian hope. Though their lives were lived in very concrete places which called for their very real attention and commitment to ministry, their vocation was predicated on the reality of a heavenly city. “All these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. . . they desire a better country, that is a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them,” (Hebrews 11: 13, 16). The question is are our eyes fastened on that same city? Are we motivated by an alternative vision different from the one predicted by

our culture? May God grant that it would be so and that, we, too, might have the courage to embark on the journey of faith, “not knowing where we are going.”