

SERMON: 2018/05/06 (6th Sunday in Easter, Year B) - Acts 10:44-48; Psalm 98; 1 John 5:1-6 & John 15:9-17_BTR

[Invite children to the front.]

[Brandish a new toy still in its packaging.]

Sometimes, when we get a new toy, we like it *sooo(!)* much that we don't want others to use it: our love for it *prevents* us from sharing it even with our friends and family.

And when we see others playing with it that makes us jealous.

This was how some of the first *Jewish*-Christians were:

Peter, one of "the 12," was *sooo(!)* excited about Jesus coming back from the dead that he ran around and told everyone he met all about it: "Jesus is alive!", he shouted. "He really is 'Lord of all'!" [Acts 10:36]"

And lots of people who were listening decided that they too wanted to 'receive... [the] forgiveness of sins through [Jesus'] name', [v.43].

And so they asked Peter to baptise them in water.

But a small group called '[t]he circumcised believers' didn't want them to be baptised like they had been, [v.45].

And isn't that silly?

Because Jesus has 'commanded us to preach to [all] people' [v.42], and that's what we should do: we should share our gifts from God with everyone. [Give toy to one of the children to keep.]

Let's pray: Father God...

[Dismiss children.]

The "Founding Father," Benjamin Franklin, once wrote to a correspondent that 'in this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes.' [n.1]

Now, as a "Brit" I'm wary of contradicting such a fiercely and famously intelligent *American* "treasure:" at the end of the nineteenth century, the historian, Senator Henry Cabot Lodge called him 'the greatest intellect the New World has yet produced' [n.2]; but the thing is, you see, "Ol' Ben" is just plain wrong - *gravely* mistaken. For there is something else *equally* certain - as real as the ground under our feet and the air in our lungs, and that's that - as the Psalmist reminds us today - there is coming a day 'when [the LORD will] judge the earth [v.9]; and the dead

will rise from the earth to greet Him, 'some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.' [Dan. 12:2. See also: 1 These. 4:16b.]

The sane question, then, that one should ask themselves is: "What will be *my* fate?"

Or, perhaps more astutely, this: "What part can I play - *if any* - to ensure that I'm among those who are resurrected as Jesus (to enjoy a new life of heavenly glory)?"

And the answer in the mouths of some preachers can seem deceptively simple:

"Pray this prayer; say these words."

And we think to ourselves with some *instinctive* - I think - incredulity: "*Is that it?! Like an incantation?*"

Or casting a Hogwarts-ian spell?

Can it really be so simple?"

Well, yes(!) but also no.

"Yes" because we are expressly and firmly enjoined in the Scriptures to 'confess with [our] lips that *Jesus is Lord[!]*' [Rom 10:9], and make no mistake: there is no salvation apart from a contrite heart that recognises in His sacrifice on the cross that *there* is the place where *I* belong, that - to use the the Authorized Version's term - those are supposed to be my 'stripes', which He bore [1 Pet. 2:24, K. J. V].

And so the start of our journey to eternal life *is* somewhat "mechanistic."

But notice I say merely "the start."

Because that moment is only that and no more:

to evoke Charles Wesley's hymn - like the flash of a brilliant 'ray' of light in a very dark cave [n.3] - a *critical* moment of clarity by which we find our bearings - apprehend, that is, the true nature of man, and then *re-orient* ourselves to a different path - the 'narrow' [Mt. 7:13-14] path of '*abid[ing]* in...[the] love [of Christ]' [Jn. 15:9], (which is to paraphrase this morning's gospel reading).

And "if", add Jesus, "*if(!)*" you continue in obedience to His example, *then* 'your joy may be complete'. [v.11]

Now, the second part of that "equation" sounds awesome, right?

"*Complete*" joy?

Woah.

My happiness, let me tell you, is so temporary; so ephemeral; so elusive.

And then somebody cuts in front of me, or I notice that my toast is too dark or my peanut-butter is too crunchy, and then it's "sour grapes" all day. And so much so

that the idea of “compete” joy is almost impossible to conceive: what would that even *look* like? But boy do I want it! ‘Imagine being totally free of fear, sadness, danger, deprivation, pain, loss, and death.’ [n.4] *This* is what Jesus promises.

But that preceding qualification makes us nervous doesn’t it?

That “if.”

And it matters.

It matters because it implies that ‘[o]ne is not eternally secure until one is securely in eternity.’ [n.5]

And that likely, therefore, ‘[t]here is then this chain of things leading to *actual* salvation’ [n.6], and that is, we hear, ‘to go and bear fruit’ [v.16], the “fruit” of holiness, of obeying Christ’s commandment - the commandment to ‘love one another as [He] love[s] [us].’ [v.12]

So, you wonder: “Well, what assurance can I have?” (that I will rise to experience “everlasting life.”)

Is there any to be had?

After all, most days I do a pretty poor job of living up to that (ambitious) calling of loving others as Jesus loves me and, evidently, that is not of no consequence.

But again, I say to you: “Yes!”

Yes, that is, to any who ‘believes that Jesus is the[ir Redeemer]’, [see: 1 Jn. 5:1].

How?

Because, explains the Apostle John in his epistle, to arrive at that place of conviction is evidence of God already at work in you, preparing you for His Kingdom that is to come: I quote - ‘*the Spirit* is the one that testifies’, [v.6].

(And we see this in *Acts* too: that, having heard Peter preach, a group of ‘Gentiles’ begins to “extol” God - or, more precisely, respond to the “Good News” that they’ve heard - only *once* the ‘Holy Spirit had been poured out...on [them]’, [10:44-45].

And what we learn in the Bible is that He comes to those that He does *only* as ‘... [a] pledge.. The...“down payment”...“first installment” [sic.] or “deposit”...and thus the surety that God plans [for me to enjoy His presence in the second Zion forever, among all the saints].’ [n.7]

My faith, in other words, my *current* belief that the perfect righteousness of Christ has been imputed to me by my confession that I alone rendered His death (on Calvary) necessary [Rom. 4:24-25], *verifies* that I must be, presently, ‘born of God’ [1 Jn. 5:1], which is to say in “a state of Grace,” being made ready for an eternal inheritance.

And *this* is a very refreshing spring that gives *much* peace - a peace that John calls ‘victory’ - ‘the victory that conquers the world’, [1 Jn. 5:4].

It is this peace that reassures me when I stumble or fall in my ad hoc, half-hearted discipleship.

It is this peace that reassures me that there isn't some magic quota of good deeds, which I must perform.

But it is also a fragile, delicate peace agitated and quickly disturbed by my lack of resemblance to the well-pleasing Son [see: Mt. 3:17], and eager to earn His friendship though it cannot whilst it remain in this prison of unbeatified flesh, [see: Rom. 7:18].

But I won't go on, because we'll only be going "in circles."
Instead, let me close by reading to you this:

'We may note first that the New Testament does not regard the Christian as a person who must be entirely free from sin if he is to be a Christian at all. While sin is obviously inconsistent with faith, it does not immediately and automatically extinguish it. ... [For t]here is also much evidence that God cares for believers and preserves them from falling away [entirely]. The care of God for [His] "little flock" is a very important part of the teaching of Jesus; [and] it is [offered] as an antidote to fear for the future... [Indeed,] it is apparent that believers may be confident of persevering through the power of God, and the majority of believers [will] persevere. To state anything less would make an utter mockery of...New Testament doctrine...'; [n.8].

Footnotes:

1. Whiting, Bartlett Jere (1977), *Early American Proverbs and Proverbial Phrases*, Cambridge, M. A.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 98.
2. Lodge, H. C. (1881), *A Short History of the English Colonies in America*, New York, N. Y.: Harper & Brothers, 256.
3. 'And Can It be' (1738), see verse 4: https://hymnary.org/text/and_can_it_be_that_i_should_gain
4. Solie, Linda J. (2013), *Take Charge of Your Emotions: Seven Steps to Overcoming Depression, Anxiety, and Anger*, Bloomington, M. N.: Bethany

House Publishers (Baker Publishing Group), 88.

5. Witherington, Ben, III (2016), *New Testament Theology and Ethics: Volume Two*, Downers Grove, I. L.: InterVarsity Press, 746. (My emphasis.)
6. *Ibid.*, 325.
7. Witherington, Ben, III (2007), *The Letters to Philemon, the Colossians, and the Ephesians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Captivity Epistles*, Grand Rapids, M. I.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 237.
8. Marshall, I. Howard (1969), *Kept by the Power of God: A Study of Perseverance and Falling Away*, Minneapolis, M. N.: Bethany Fellowship, Inc., 197-199.