

March 25, 2012

The Fifth Sunday in Lent

Jeremiah 31:31-34

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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A New Age of Reason

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, who composed today's *Mass* when he was the age of some in our youth choir appears to have observed the forms of the Roman Catholic Church of his day, while acting and thinking quite independently. Towards the end of his life any needs he had for ritual, community and friendship appear to have been satisfied by his membership as a Freemason. He was very much a child of what is usually termed 'The Enlightenment.' The Enlightenment was an intellectual movement toward the development of reason and science over and against superstition. The historical and philosophical buffs among us will recognize that in spite of the music of Mozart, Bach, Haydn, Handel and others, the age was sometimes considered 'cold' in its affect and in time it gave way to *Romanticism*. This can be satirized as a mover from "I think therefore I am" to "I drink, therefore I am," or even "I dance therefore we are."

I had to make a similar move rather personally and early on in my own life of conscious faith. Some of you know that in my later teenage years I committed myself to follow Jesus in an evangelical community largely shaped by the Scripture Union and not dissimilar to Inter-Varsity or Young Life. Those expressions of the faith were and are really good at engaging the whole person including our emotional life and response. Unfortunately these movements were also generally founded on a closed theological system in which any question I might have had was answered within the system. "You don't understand prayer? You must not be praying in the right way. If you had real faith you would move mountains, so pray for real faith." You get the idea. That kind of hyper-rationalism trying to manage and excuse the Holy Spirit was not going to be sustainable for long, let alone for a lifetime. Many of my friends from those days have rejected the faith as a con-job, a scam that is largely about power and control, in-groups and out-groups and the like. I, on the other hand, found myself in America and surrounded by a large Episcopal parish as the old foundations of my faith disintegrated around me. By the grace of God, I was drawn into a new and far less rationalistic understanding and experience of God in the midst of a vibrant community that bore little or no relation to the Home Counties Church of England parishes of my childhood. It was as though I had been given a new covenant. Certainly there was some loss involved. To this day I wish I

still had the naïve expectation that God would speak directly and clearly to me, without ambiguity, if only I would listen right; but I also know that is silly and is not how God works in the world. This new law of grace, of divine reason rather than human rationalism; this law not founded on God being 'a cause' and all else being 'an effect;' this law in which God is not one thing that exists among many, but is rather the source and ground of our being, (pre-existent if you like). This gift had begun to be written on my heart.

Jeremiah, whom I have dubbed in the past 'the Eeyore of the Bible,' was all gloom and doom as the people had spurned their original covenant, failing to take care of the widows and orphans, failing to tend their relationship with God thinking that the existence of the Temple was a the guarantee of grace they needed as they went about their lives buying and selling, making alliances and furthering their own interests in all manner of ways. Jeremiah had told them that the Temple would be destroyed and they scoffed at him, certain of the inviolability of Zion. And so it came to pass and the leaders of the people were taken off to exile in Babylon (modern Iraq) where they were supposed to intermarry and disappear as a distinctive people. Instead they found their faith renewed and their hope for a New Jerusalem stimulated. Jeremiah wanted them to enjoy that grace where they could live into a new way of being faithful, rather as Jesus offered all those years later when he looked to reinterpret the Law that had become a means of separating and categorizing people as 'good' or 'bad' and said that they should look for the original grace of the identity given in the law in right relation with him from now on.

It is time for us to look for and pray for some such renewing grace ourselves. We have been hearing for a long time about the decline in numbers of people who associate themselves with the Episcopal Church (and indeed most churches). We have thought that we might be insulated a little in the South East where older notions of community still have reality. We have measured increased commitment less in numbers and more in the generosity of our people with money. We've been to conferences about how we must be current, engaged in social media, exploring more contemporary musical forms that communicate to younger generations and on and on. None of this is touching fundamental cultural shifts, some of which are powerfully made manifest in the libertarian Charles Murray's latest book called *Coming Apart*.¹ (You might remember him as author of *The Bell Curve* some years back.) He sees the fault lines in America -- and dangerous fault lines at that -- not in terms of race or economic status, but in terms of increasingly separated 'classes.' On an intuitive basis, I agree with him. I neither need to take on nor discuss his conclusions here. But his data about what he terms religiosity and its relation to happiness in America is compelling. He sees religiosity along with industriousness, marriage and honesty or integrity as the fundamental virtues of the 'American Project.' On one hand he charts significant reduction in religiosity among all people, perhaps less the upper class than the lower.² On the other hand he finds an

¹Charles Murray, *Coming apart: The State of White America, 1960-2010* (Crown Forum/Random House, 2012)

² *Coming Apart* p. 200-208

extraordinary correlation between those who declare themselves very happy with those who confess to some kind of belief and who attend religious services weekly or more often.³

In our surveys and strategic thinking of recent years we have consistently affirmed pride in our history at All Saints', and satisfaction with our parish as it is today, even though we all recognize that we need to do something about our facilities if this congregation is to be sustained over the next few generations. Dr. Murray articulates the virtues associated with marriage, industriousness, honesty and religiosity and even notes that "the new upper class does a good job of practicing some of (them)..." He also sees a loss of self-confidence about them such that this new upper class "no longer preaches (the virtues)." He says "It has lost self-confidence in the rightness of its own customs and values, and preaches nonjudgmentalism instead."⁴ It seems to me that at some level our future is entirely predictable: Christians will become an ever declining minority of oddballs, increasingly irrelevant to the world which will struggle for some 'secular' basis for morality; OR we can look for renewal of our hearts, by which we begin or return to paying attention to our own growth in faith. The law must be, once again, written on our hearts, and we cannot assume that programmatic solutions or institutional solutions will be provided to ensure that the story of what really matters is told and enacted with integrity for generations to come. It matters little whether the Episcopal Church survives or what form it takes. It matters a great deal that the story is told and lived out for the hope of the world. Renewal will come as we pray for it, attend to our own practices of engaging in worship, addressing the challenges of life as we talk and study, get out of our comfort zones and serve in friendship those in need as a matter of the renewal of real community across class boundaries, and as we learn how to advocate for justice in the councils of the world without being torn apart by the political hair triggers that are being so assiduously and expensively nurtured in us through our current electoral season.

The promise to Jeremiah is also a promise to us if we will but pay attention: *I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the LORD," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.*

In a time of prayer, with Holy Week and Easter on the near horizon, let's take a time of silence and attend to our own needs for renewal begging God's grace for us and all who will come after us...

³ *Coming Apart* p. 259-260

⁴ *Coming Apart* p. 289