

November 25, 2012

The 26th Sunday after Pentecost

Daniel 7:9-10; 13-14; John 18:33-37

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

The Rev'd Geoffrey M. St.J. Hoare, rector

A Credible Faith

For an institution or a person to have credibility, it or she or he must have some degree of perceived expertise and some degree of trustworthiness. I was talking to one of my brothers the other day who was of the opinion that the Church of England has lost credibility with its decision not to move forward in allowing women to become bishops. He found it sad that they were continuing to have public fights over whether gay people should be allowed to marry and whether women could be bishops instead of addressing things that really matter. I expect that the Archbishop of Canterbury would agree with him (after taking a couple of Advil). He went on to say that the BBC had also lost credibility with its handling of scandals and cover-ups of the criminal activities of a popular presenter of programs for children. He said that things had reached a pretty low point where the major institution to which one can look for credibility is the government, with an upper class Prime Minister who says “call me Dave.”

Credibility is about some combination of expertise and trustworthiness and we who make up the church have to work to be credible every day, most especially when a majority of our co-religionists espouse and proclaim a version of the faith that we find incredible. I don't expect that many of you are familiar with the name 'Rob Bell' and that if you are it will be from a profile of him in a recent *New Yorker* magazine.¹ He was the founding pastor of an influential megachurch in Michigan called Mars Hill and he wrote a book called *Love Wins* (2011) in which he questioned the reality of hell. Not terribly profound for us, but a seismic shift in his evangelical circles. (I've always been happy with a Jesuit's statement: “I'm obliged to believe in hell. I'm not obliged to believe that there's anyone in it.”) That was the beginning of a journey that eventually led him to resign from Mars Hill, loved by many but criticized by more of his members because he was not toeing the proper evangelical or fundamentalist line. He recognized a tension between the necessary structure, consistency and caution required to lead a megachurch. He struggled to become comfortable with the idea of church at all. In this respect he is like many who have found great ecclesial institutions to be without credibility when they are seeking some kind of spiritual life. This is not how he describes his own journey but it seems to me that he found himself, in a strange way, aligning himself with those who claim to be “spiritual, not religious.”

Some of you know that I wrote an undergraduate thesis on the twentieth century German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He was imprisoned and eventually killed by the Nazis toward the end of the Second World War for participating in the German

¹ Kelefa Sanneh, *The Hell Raiser: A megachurch pastor's search for a more forgiving faith*, *The New Yorker*, November 26, 2012 p 56-65

Resistance to Hitler. Some of his most compelling writing came in the form of letters he wrote from his prison cell. In some of those he began to explore the concept of what he called 'religionless Christianity', by which he seems to have meant Faith without Religiosity. He admired the fortitude of some of his atheistic fellow captives and was dismayed by the fearful mewling of some who called themselves Christian. He was not opposed to church at all, but wanted to see real faith rather than a kind of churchy piety. he did not say this directly, but he would have found baptism to be more about death than about purity, more about radically new life than about cleansing. The behavior of some Christians, which he described as 'religious', undermined the credibility of the church. It was ever thus.

Bonhoeffer wrote a letter to a friend on the occasion of his friend's son's baptism, in which he could have been addressing some of our institutional anxieties today. He wrote "Our church, which has been fighting in these years only for its self-preservation, as though that were an end in itself, is incapable of taking the word of reconciliation and redemption to mankind and the world."² He certainly saw baptism as a powerful word to a broken world, just as it can be today, but he also looked for a new beginning for the church. In this, he was probably not so far from the work of Rob Bell, and that band of pastors who start churches for people who dislike church. The difference is that Bonhoeffer knew that any community will eventually take on institutional forms in some way, *and* he knew also that those forms could never be made to appear of ultimate concern if the community of the faithful were to retain credibility.

One churchy claim that needs to be addressed today and with great care is the assumption that in the end the whole world will realize that Christ is the King and Lord of all history. Our worship this morning is filled with claims that could be heard as triumphal, and if they are heard that way, then we are rendering the faith incredible. "Jesus shall reign..." "Crown him with many crowns..." "The Ancient One on his throne of fiery flames." "Jesus, the ruler of the kings of earth." This kind of thing has led some to claim without irony that Christianity is the only true faith and that in time, probably after death, all will come to recognize the reality that Christ is the cosmic ruler of all things. Such claims give rise to a kind of smugness that is undermined by the gospel message in which Jesus avoids being called a king, --at least the kind of king that would be understood by Roman authorities.

Smug and Simple Christianity--the kind that wants to relegate all religious expression to being somehow less than, or subject to, a Christian vision--undermines Christian credibility. This is the kind of Christianity that is filled with religiosity, that would make the world smaller than it is, forgetting that the creation includes ever expanding universes, expanding with ever greater speeds; the kind of Christianity that would limit the vision of what might be to what happened yesterday; that would turn the graceful gift of the story of God's grace and love into a set of legal shackles and much else besides that renders our faith unbelievable or incredible. What does *not* undermine credibility is *authenticity, humility and integrity* of the kind that we see in Jesus. This is the faith that says to others "I hear the call and claim of God on my life in this story of Jesus. I'd

² From "Thoughts on the Day of the Baptism of Dietrich Wilhelm Rudiger Bethge"

be glad to share that with you. You are welcome to walk that way with me. And I would like to learn about your way as well.”

Brothers and sisters, we are not baptized into an institution without credibility. We are baptized into Christ. We are not baptized into a church filled with gobbledygook. We are baptized into a community of people that helps us know who we are and tells the story of what really matters in and for life. We are not baptized into an incredible set of doctrines, but into a community that spans generations and which has to change and be born anew in every generation. We are not baptized into a kind of cosmic empire with the unbelievable requirement that we bow down to a cosmic emperor. We are baptized into the reign of God which is even now apparent in our midst wherever we see authenticity, integrity and real, effective love of the kind that we tell about in the story of Jesus, who came into the world to testify to the truth. Therefore we say with confidence that the baptism of these children before us will be a credible sign of life and light in a sinful and broken world; and a baptism into a credible, lively faith to which we strive day by day to bear witness ourselves.

I offer this in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.