O Crux Ave

April 7th, 2019

5th Sunday of Lent

The ancient Greek tragedian Aeschylus only wanted his epitaph to read that he had fought at the battle of Marathon. No mention of his great plays is made. Maybe when he contemplated his life and death, fighting for freedom seemed to be the one thing that gave his life meaning and glory. Another playwright more than two thousand years later had a very different epitaph. The grave of August Strindberg in Stockholm reads: “O Crux ave, spes unica! Hail to the Cross, my only hope!” Again, there is no mention of any worldly achievements. The second epitaph makes more sense to me. The cross is our only hope. The cross is what gives our lives meaning and value because it is through the cross that God made known his love for humanity (John 3). It is through the cross that we have redemption from sin and death (Ephesians 1:7, Hebrews 9:15). It is through the cross that God reconciled us to Himself and enabled us to receive His Holy Spirit, the very Spirit of Jesus (Romans 8:9; Galatians 4:6). The cross is our salvation. The cross is the gift of God Himself to us.

When I was growing up, a favourite hymn in Japan was *Kirisuto Ni Ha Kaerare Masen*, a translation of “I’d Rather Have Jesus”. Most Japanese who sang this knew the meaning well, for they had given up families, friends, even business privileges or academic positions and social status because of their faith in Christ. They became pariahs for Christ. My grandparents were friends with a family who went into forced labour in the mines during the 1940s because they refused to go along with the Japanese United Church and worship the Emperor or affirm the cause of imperialism. Anyway, the text of the hymn reads:

I'd rather have Jesus than silver or gold

I'd rather be his than have riches untold

I'd rather have Jesus than houses or land

Yes, I'd rather be led by his nail pierced hands

Than to be the king of a best domain and be held in sins dread sway

I'd rather have Jesus than anything this world affords today

Although attributed to Rhea Miller and George Beverly Shea, Swedish hymnals attribute the song to Prince Oscar Bernadotte, the son of King Oscar II of Sweden, who relinquished his crown so that he could marry a commoner who shared his religious views: “Bernadotte was very active in social organizations, especially religious ones, such as the YMCA of Sweden and Friends of Mission to the Laps, both of which he chaired for many years. As the only member of Swedish royalty known to be *born again*, he founded the Södertälje Conferences, as inspired by the Keswick Convention, in 1898 and was an engaging inter-denominational Christian lay preacher of wide repute”; “The match was regarded as a great sorrow within the royal house, but it received a lot of sympathy from the public. It was said that a bridge had been placed between the people and the royal house” (*Wikipedia,* s.v. Prince Oscar Bernadotte). Whether or not the words originate with him, Prince Oscar literally gave up a royal crown to win a different kind of crown.

The song expresses the sentiment that the apostle Paul expresses today in our reading: “Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ” (Philippians 3:7-8). Paul was one of the most well-travelled, well-known, well-studied men of the 1st Century, the equal or superior of Seneca the Younger, Epictetus, Plutarch or Agrippa the Skeptic. Not only was he rich in experiences—imprisonments, shipwrecks, starvation and sickness (2 Corinthians 11 12), he was rich in heavenly and angelic visions and religious experiences unparalleled. And yet, he says that none of this matters: “I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.” One could easily spend the rest of Lent just pondering these words. To what extent have we resisted the temptation to elevate the things of this world at the expense of our relationship to the Lord Jesus? To what extent do we elevate the gifts from God over God Himself? Neither riches nor visions nor experiences nor accolades nor accomplishments nor academic discoveries mean anything to Paul in comparison to knowing the Lord Jesus. And if you start comparing first century writings, you will probably discover that Paul was undoubtedly one of the happiest people in the 1st Century.

The apostles left their nets to follow Jesus. A woman troubled by seven demons left her darkness behind and followed Jesus. The untimely apostle left the life he knew on the road to Damascus and followed Jesus. In coming to Christ, there is a willingness to leave something behind, to leave everything behind. The radiance and magnetism of Christ draw us to a hope that far outshines anything this world has to offer, a hope born from the new life that Christ gives to us—the resurrection life: “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.” (Philippians 3:10-11). The hope of becoming loving like Christ and sharing in the life of Christ through his death is the hope that inevitably leads to the joy that Paul extols and commands in the fourth chapter of his letter to the Philippians: “Rejoice in the Lord always!” (Philippians 4:4). It does not say “Rejoice in the world!” but “Rejoice in the Lord!” One of the things that Rudolf Bultmann was right to point out was the eschatological, existential nature of the early Christian faith, writing: “It may seem strange that in the list of virtues at Gal. 5:22f. ‘joy’ appears as a fruit of the Spirit second only to ‘love’. But ‘joy’ actually is one of the qualities of the eschatological existence founded by the Spirit, for the nature of the Reign of God is ‘righteousness and joy and peace in the Holy Spirit’ (Rom. 14:7). The combination of ‘joy’ and ‘peace’ occurring here and elsewhere (Gal. 5:22; Rom. 15:13) permits us to recognize ‘joy’, too, as an eschatological sense…The believer’s existence, being eschatological, is an existence in joy” (Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament.* Tr. Kendrick Grobel. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1951. 339).

And thus we rejoice in the Lord. St. Basil the Great said, “You were born that you might see God.” The whole purpose of our transient life is an eternal relationship with Jesus. Although I agree with much in his book, I think it is sad that Rowan Williams’s book *Being Christian* only has chapters on baptism, the Bible, Eucharist and prayer. I would think a whole chapter on Jesus would be essential. Many people are baptized, read the Bible, take communion, and pray—but they do not concern themselves with having a relationship with Jesus. And yet, it is because of Jesus that we are baptized into his death and resurrection, that we read the Bible which speaks of Him, that we take communion to remember his body and blood and become His one body, and it is because of Him that we pray—that we might abide in Him and He in us—that we might live in daily conversation with our dearest, holiest friend and Lord. James Stewart once wrote: “All around, is one ever-recurring figure—Jesus the Shepherd, Jesus the Fisherman, Jesus the Bridegroom, Jesus the Prophet, Priest, King. Or take the Church of the Reformation. Where did that great movement originate? Not, as is sometimes stated, from a sudden upsurge of dialectical controversy. Not from any outburst of partisan emotion. It had its origin and authentic beginning precisely where Martin Luther himself said that every true Christian must begin. ‘Begin,’ he said, ‘from the wounds of Christ.’ Once again, we might cite the Church of the Wesleyan revival. Methodism, we know, has always had its characteristic organization, its social passion, its high dogmatic theology: but you do not come upon the real secret of Methodism—its glow, its strength, its drive—until you have heard Charles Wesley singing ‘Jesus, Lover of my soul! Thou, O Christ, art all I want: more than all in Thee I find.’ Always there is that decisive relationship to a Person, always that passionate adherence. ‘What the Church possesses,’ declares Dr. T.W. Manson, ‘is not immunity from sin and error but the abiding presence of Him who is the way, the truth, and the life. She is promised not safety but victory.’ There was once a famous Church at Ephesus. The New Testament has branded in a sentence the tragedy of the Ephesian Church: ‘Thou has left thy first love.’ But what has been the inmost meaning and the glory of every great revival of religion but this—that there the Church has returned to her first love, and hailed the Bridegroom of her soul, and found ‘glad confident morning again’?...Take the record of saints, the men and women of God in every age…and you will find that, utterly different as such men have been in almost every other respect, always there has been one common centre of their life, one burning heart of their experience, a communion with—almost an absorption in—Jesus, a clinging to this living Person with every fibre of their being. He was been with them always, even unto the end of the world” (James Stewart, *A Faith to Proclaim.* Vancouver, BC: Regent College Publishing, 2002. 148-149). A communion that absorbs one and makes one cling to the Saviour! That is the one burning heart of saintliness and faith.

This is the gospel. This is the journey. That Jesus should mean more to us than anything else we know. As Paul says, “Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:12-14). Some years ago an Orthodox priest named Father Libyos wrote about his experience of meeting a Chinese monk on Mount Athos, the holy mountain and monastic complex in Greece for Orthodox Christians, and shares a brief interview:

“Brother, how did you, a Chinese man, embrace Orthodox Christian monasticism coming from such a great cultural tradition? Were you a Buddhist?”

“Yes, of course, I was a Buddhist.”

“What won you over to Christianity?”

“Divine companionship!”

“Excuse me?”

“In Buddhism…you are very very much alone. There is no God. Your entire struggle is with yourself. You are alone with yourself, with your ego. You are totally alone in this path. Great loneliness Father. But here you have an assistant, a companion and a fellow-traveler in God. You are not alone. You have someone who loves you, who cares about you. He cares even if you don’t understand Him. You speak with Him. You tell Him how you feel, what you would have hoped for—there is a relationship. You are not alone in the difficult struggles of life and spiritual perfection.” (<https://www.johnsanidopoulos.com/2011/01/why-chinese-buddhist-became-orthodox.html> ).

Indeed, in renouncing the world we renounce lostness, loneliness, and lovelessness. In straining forward and leaving everything behind, we run for the one prize that makes it worthwhile—the prize of being with Christ for all of eternity. Paul uses the language of runners, which brings us back to the subject of Marathon, the ancient battle that gave its name to our long distance races. Maybe Aeschylus was not entirely wrong about his epitaph. Sacrifice is far more valuable than literary accolades. And freedom is a precious, precious thing, and something we regularly forfeit today in our quest to be secure and fashionably just, all the while undermining our security and justice. Even so, the freedom of the world is also illusory and temporary. Our real freedom is in Christ, and we run a race and fight a battle that leads to ultimate freedom from sin and death, from despair and decay, from lostness, loneliness, and lovelessness—a race of true freedom. As Paul says to the Corinthians: “Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way as to take the prize. Everyone who competes in the games trains with strict discipline. They do it for a crown that is perishable, but we do it for a crown that is imperishable. Therefore I do not run aimlessly” (1 Corinthians 9:24-26). There is only one crown—and that crown is Christ. *O crux ave unica spes! Hail to the cross our only hope.*