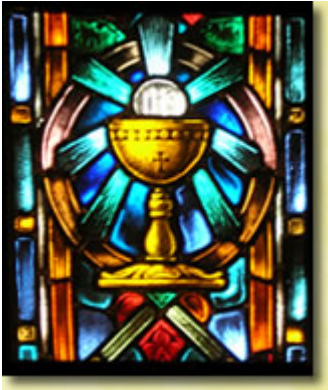


Taste and See that the Lord is Good! A Sermon on Doubt

Psalm 138
Hebrews 10: 32-39
Matt. 24:9-14



Today's lectionary readings are for the feast day of the Martyrs of Uganda. These were a group of Roman Catholic and Anglican men who were killed by King Mwanga on June 3, 1886 for their refusal to renounce their Christian faith. The martyrs went to their deaths singing hymns, and praying for their enemies. The bravery of these young men so impressed the bystanders that many converted to Christianity, and the deaths of the martyrs of Uganda is considered the real beginning of the spread of Christianity in Uganda. There are today around nine million Anglicans in Uganda, and Trinity School for Ministry has close relations with them, especially with Uganda Christian University, and also with their Archbishop, Stanley Ntagali.

Given that today's lectionary readings are for the feast day of martyrs, it is not surprising that the focus of the readings is on holding on to faith in the midst of doubt. The Matthew and Hebrews passages specifically mention persecution. In Matthew, Jesus says, "Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake." (Matt. 24:9). Hebrews speaks of "the former days," when the hearers were "publicly exposed to

reproach and affliction." Some were imprisoned, and some were "plundered" of their property. (Heb. 10:33-34). The Psalmist mentions another kind of threat to faith: "Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve my life." (Ps. 138:7). Jesus' Parable of the Sower mentions a third threat to faith: those who are distracted by the "cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and desires for other things." (Mark 4:18).

These passages might be discouraging. They indicate that it is a normal part of the Christian life to experience doubt, to be tempted to abandon one's faith, to just give up on being a Christian. I would suggest that these passages are actually cause for encouragement. They give us advance warning that being a disciple of Jesus is not all picnics in May, or singing "I've got peace like a river in my soul" when we're at summer camp, or the first day of June Term at seminary. They tell us that if you are a Christian, and you take the thing seriously, there is going to come a time when you are going to wonder, "What was I thinking?" And, "Is it too late to get out of this?" They also tell us that when it comes to reasons for doubting your faith, there is nothing new under the sun.

Persecution? In this country, Christians do not experience anything like what the Ugandan martyrs experienced, but do not deceive yourself. Ten years ago, I would have thought that the greatest threat to Christianity in our culture was "New Age religion," people who were into crystals and channeling and past lives regression. In the last decade, however, a group of thinkers who call themselves the New Atheists have appeared, and they are surprisingly virulent in their hatred of Christian faith. I was reading an article online the other day about an Oxford University researcher named Kathleen Taylor, who claims that religious fundamentalism is a mental illness, and can be "treated" as such. I believe that there are such people as fundamentalists, and I can say with confidence that I am not one. However, I also know that fundamentalism is

often defined as “anyone who believes more than the speaker does.” There are people who would call me a fundamentalist because of what I believe, and it concerns me that there are those who would think that my Christian faith is a mental illness which they would gladly cure. Even more disturbing than this story were the numerous comments to the article, many of which stated that all religion was a form of mental illness, and that the commenters would be happy to see all religious people committed to mental asylums. More than one commenter wrote things like “What could be more insane than believing that there is an invisible person up in the sky who knows everything you do and rewards you if you’re good and punishes you if you’re bad?” While such attitudes show a real ignorance of what Christian faith is really all about, when you live in a society in which more and more people think that only a crazy person would believe what you believe, you might begin to wonder a little bit yourself.

The second threat that leads to lack of faith is personal suffering. Over and over again, the New Atheists point to the existence of evil and suffering in the world as the single reason that no rational person could believe in the existence of a good God, and certainly more people lose their faith in God because of personal tragedy than perhaps any other reason. Great Christian thinkers like C.S. Lewis, and Kathleen Norris have written about the doubts about God’s goodness that they experienced after the death of close loved ones. If you have not yet experienced such doubt, be forewarned. You almost certainly will someday.

Finally, the problem of personal cares is, I think, a leading cause of the collapse of faith in contemporary culture. I would suggest that, for Americans, consumerism is an idol that is perhaps the greatest rival to God, even for Christians. We don’t so much become adamant atheists as we get wrapped up in our careers, our need to have the latest gadgets, our concerns for personal financial security, and just buying more things.

In the end, God gets squeezed out when all the stuff comes in. We just forget about God.

So my first observation about threats to faith is that there is nothing new under the sun. Twenty-first century Christians living in a post-modern world like to think that we're facing unique threats that no one has faced before. But the writers of the Bible knew about the three main threats: persecution, personal suffering, distraction. Our problems are the same old problems.

If the writers of the Bible knew about the problems, they also knew about the cure. The biblical writers point to three basic solutions to address questions of religious doubt.

First is wonder and gratitude. This is largely the Old Testament solution. And it's what we find in our Psalm this morning. The biggest problem with the New Atheists, I think, is a lack of imagination. Writers like Richard Dawkins live in a world that has lost its mystery. When your whole universe is reduced to what scientists can measure in laboratories, you suffer from imaginal cramp. For the New Atheists, God is just a big person who lives up in the sky. They can believe in a universe that is 14 billion years old, and whose visible size from earth is 46 billion light years, and is so incredibly fine-tuned that it can produce scientists who can measure these things, but they cannot believe in a God who could create such a universe or who is greater than the universe he has created. And certainly not greater than scientists like themselves.

Despite his troubles, the Psalmist realizes that the God who has created the universe is immensely greater than his worries because God is greater than the universe he created. "I bow down toward your holy temple, and give thanks to your name . . . for you have exalted above all things your name and your word." And later, "great is the glory of the Lord, for though the Lord is high, he regards the lowly." The ending of the

Book of Job is about re-discovering the transcendence of the God who created the world: "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the world? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements – surely you know!" (Job 38:4-5). It is this theme of divine transcendence that appears again in the second half of the book of Isaiah when Israel is banished in exile, and God now promises Israel's deliverance and return to their land: "Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand and marked off the heavens with a span, enclosed the dust of the earth in a measure and weighted the mountains in scales and the hills in a balance?" (Is. 40:12) When we find ourselves beset by doubt, it helps to take time to recover a sense of wonder. The God who created the universe is greater than the universe he created, he knows what he is doing, and he can certainly handle our troubles.

Second, there is the cross. This is the new insight that the New Testament brings to the problem of doubt. The author of Hebrews writes to those who, under persecution, are finding themselves tempted to abandon faith. He reminds his readers that Christians have something that no one else has. This transcendent Creator of the universe that the Old Testament talks about has come to us in Jesus Christ. If God spoke through prophets in the past, says Hebrews, he has now spoken in his Son, "through whom he created the world." Jesus is the "radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power." (Heb. 1:2). This transcendent source of wonder that Job and the Psalmist write about in awe has now come down to us, close and personal. By becoming one of us, Jesus knows what we go through, and he has shared in our sufferings and temptations. The author of Hebrews writes: "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin." (Heb. 4:15).

It is interesting that spiritual writers as diverse as Julian

of Norwich, Martin Luther, George Herbert, Dorothy Sayers and Karl Barth all point to one solution to the problem of evil and suffering and doubts that beset our faith. They do not tell us to grit our teeth and tough it out, but to look to Jesus Christ, and especially to Christ crucified. When we look to Christ on the cross, we find ourselves responding, as did the apostle Peter to Jesus' question in John's gospel, "Do you want to go away as well?" Peter answered, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God." (John 6:67-69).

Finally, there is hope. If the message to follow Jesus ended with the cross, we might well follow, but it would be a rather grim affair. But we worship a risen Lord, and the cross is followed by resurrection, and the whole message of Scripture is that we wait for God because we have faith that the God who acted in the past will act in the future. Turning back to our Psalm, we find "On the day I called, you answered me; my strength of soul you increased. . . . Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve my life; you stretch out your hand against the wrath of my enemies, and your right hand delivers me. The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me." (Ps. 138:3). Turning to Matthew, we read: "But the one who endures to the end will be saved. And the gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come." (Matt. 24:13-14). And, finally, again, our passage from Hebrews: "Do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward . . . you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised." (Heb. 10: 36).

Of course, hope has to do with waiting. It is because we do not yet have what we hope for that we must learn to wait. This would be the point to talk about Christian practices. There are a number of practices connected with the Christian faith: the reading of Scripture, the practice of prayer, corporate

worship, the celebration of the sacraments. It is surely no coincidence that numerous spiritual writers – Medieval mystics, George Herbert, Kathleen Norris – speak of the practical necessity of continuing the mundane tasks of praying the Daily Office, of reading and meditating on Scripture, of receiving the sacraments, of worshiping in community, when one is beset by doubts.

There is a kind of radical Protestant theology – a debased Lutheranism that Luther would have had nothing to do with – that repudiates all of this as a form of “works righteousness.” But that rather misses the point. Traditional definitions of the sacraments speak of them as “means of grace” – *grace*, not works! Biblical language about prayer and meditating on God’s word uses the language of “refreshment,” of “quenching one’s thirst,” of “satisfying hunger”: “Taste and see that the LORD is good!” (Ps. 34:8). Hebrews 6:5 speaks of those “who have tasted the goodness of the word of God.” In John 6:53, Jesus says, “unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.” Engaging in Christian practices of prayer and meditating on Scripture, receiving the sacraments, reciting the daily office, and worshiping with fellow Christians is not “works righteousness,” trying to “earn our salvation.” Rather, these are the means by which the risen Christ shares his life with us. When we are starving, we do not think of eating as a “good work,” but as a way of keeping ourselves alive. Similarly, when beset by doubt, when we are suffering from spiritual sickness, the last thing we need is to starve from lack of spiritual nourishment. In times of spiritual aridity, when prayer and worship and Bible reading might seem meaningless, one of the best things we can do is to just keep on doing it anyway. Pray, read the Bible and meditate on Scripture, receive the sacraments. These are means by which God feeds the starving soul.

If the temptations to doubt we experience are not new, neither

are the remedies for our temptations. Recover your sense of wonder at the transcendent God who created and runs the universe, and be grateful. Look to the cross where your transcendent Creator become what we are; on that cross, he took upon himself your suffering. You do not suffer alone. Continue to hope that what God has begun in Christ, he will complete in you, and some day, in the whole universe. It might help to remember that these three prescriptions correspond to the three theological virtues. Faith is the recognition that this universe we live in is not all that is, but that there is a God of wonder who created and watches over it. Love is the awareness that in Jesus, this God is our high priest who sympathizes with our weaknesses, and has suffered them himself. Hope looks to the time when the God who raised Jesus from the dead, will finish what he has begun, and will wipe every tear from our eyes in a new creation (Rev. 21:4) . In that time when our faith is tested, let us answer as did Simon Peter, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."

Preached on the Feast Day of the Martyrs of Uganda, 2013
Trinity School for Ministry Chapel