

5th Sunday of Easter, May 15, 2022

This past Tuesday I went to the dentist for my semi annual checkup. In my humble opinion, a visit to the dentist's office is the closest approximation to reliving the experience of childhood that we have. When I was young I used to approach the appointment with some degree of dread, waiting helplessly as the cleaning and the examination proceeded, trying to hold still as various metal objects were inserted into my mouth. Then, after an anxious wait, the dentist would come out and (hopefully) declare; "No cavities"! The relief was immense. The drill was, for the time being, defeated. Then the hygienist would give me a toothbrush and a sticker, and send me on my way. Today a trip to the dentist still evokes that same feeling of being subjected to forces out of my control. The relief of having no cavities and clear X-Rays is no less intense. The dental practice is still located in the same converted house but it is now a dental palace filled with sophisticated machines that can scan your brain, never mind your teeth, and a checkup costs 25 times more than in the old days. The nice hygienist, however, still handed me a brand new toothbrush.....but no sticker. It was the hygienist that got me thinking.

She was new, and spoke in very precise but heavily accented English. Her name is Irina, and in the course of a conversation where she did most of the talking and I asked questions in between plaque scrapings and rinses, I asked her where she was from "originally originally". Irina is from Ukraine, and though she emigrated here some years ago she still has extensive family in that country, mostly in western Ukraine but some in the east. Some have gotten out and some remain, and so she worries. She spoke of how prolonged the conflict has become and how it has produced "chronic suffering". The war has become a slow, terrible grind with an uncertain outcome. There is on the one hand an outpouring of humanitarian relief and support for the Ukrainian people from neighboring countries and around the world. On the other hand is an oppressive, destructive, force of evil, and try as we might, we cannot just "sweep it away". Oh, to sweep it away! That would be wonderful.

Ukraine is a country, a people. In our individual lives we often wish we could "sweep away" suffering. I had an uncle, Loring Hannah, who was exposed to nerve gas and for several hours was buried alive under rubble in Italy (Anzio) in WWII. Some years after the war he developed a "nervous condition" (doctors did not know what to call it) which worsened through his adult life. His last 17 years on this earth were spent in a private care facility. He was unable to move, except for those times when he would respond to someone by summoning all of his energy to say one word; "Amen"! The nurses and doctors there cared for him like family, and their efforts no doubt prolonged his life but could not eliminate his suffering. I say this because I know that practically everyone here today can think of friends and loved ones who have had, and continue to, endure so much of this "human condition".

We are people of the resurrection. We are people who believe that in the end, in whatever form it takes, God's plan for humanity will prevail. Love will win. It appears, however, that in all things where we hope and pray for health, peace and justice; in all of the areas where we petition God in our prayers of the people; progress can be slow, halting, and sometimes reversed! A 19th century clergyman named Thomas Parker said that "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice". Martin Luther King adopted that as one of his favorite lines. When thinking about our individual and collective struggles, whether it is armed conflict, health, racial and ethnic tension, poverty, or the preservation of our environment,

progress is often slower and more uncertain than we like. Outcomes are seldom immediate and perfectly satisfying. I think that is what Reverend Parker and subsequently Dr. King meant. God will win. Justice will prevail, but we are people of a patient, enduring, tough, and, as is implied by our Collect of the day, a steadfast resurrection. We are to be steadfast as we follow Jesus.

In our gospel today, John quotes Jesus as saying; "As I said to the Jews , so I say to you". He was drawing a distinction between the Jewish leadership he did not trust and which was cooperating with the Romans, and everyone else. Make no mistake about it, everyone sitting around that table was Jewish and Jesus did not mean to imply that there was anything wrong with being Jewish. When this gospel was written, the author was trying to encourage the followers of the young "Jesus Movement" to adhere to their belief that Jesus was the Messiah. They were still pious Jews. They were in the process of separating from the pious Jews who did not believe Jesus was the Messiah. That evolved into rabbinic Judaism.

There were more similarities than differences between the two groups. They worshiped the same God. Though the cultural differences became more pronounced as Christianity eventually spread beyond the Holy Land, at the time they both followed the same 600+ rules governing Jewish daily life. The most compelling similarity was in their eschatology, or their belief in what will happen in "the end times". In the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) the book of Daniel predicts the coming of a powerful Messiah that will "sweep away" evil and restore peace and justice to Israel. It is a book very sympathetic to oppressed minorities and the generally downtrodden and very harsh on the oppressors. In the Revelation of John, which very deliberately references the Hebrew Bible over 400 times, the Messiah establishes a new heaven and earth. The evil ones (Romans) are "swept away" and death will be no more. The belief systems are resoundingly similar, though the identity of the Messiah is not.

Finally, in the Hebrew Bible the second coming was expected to be a "big event" defined by unmistakable power and glory. The Messiah would be a great military and/or political figure. There is historical evidence that Jesus Himself thought that the redemption of mankind would not only be a "big event" but would also be imminent, in the lifetimes of those present at the crucifixion. The human aspect of Jesus would have been surprised at how history would unfold. Further, the humble nature and background of Jesus made it difficult for even his disciples to regard Him as the Messiah of prophecy. They eventually came around, but it ran contrary to everything they were taught growing up.

We are now nearly 2000 years after the Revelation of John and 2200 years after the apocalypse of Daniel were written. The followers of rabbinic Judaism are waiting for the Messiah. Christians actively wait for the Messiah, however He chooses to do so, to finish His redemptive work. Perhaps it will be a "big event", or a series of them. Perhaps not. What is indisputable is that we all, Christians, Jews, and everyone under the sun, have lived in the human condition since humanity began. The arc of the moral universe is indeed long. Perhaps things are improving, perhaps they are bending toward justice. We have to keep trying. Through it all we can be thankful that Jesus kept it simple. We are to love God. We are to love our neighbor and to expand our definition of the word "neighbor". We will do occasionally newsworthy but mostly anonymous things in our service to God. Our hope exists, it thrives, because we are people of the brave, patient, enduring, and steadfast Resurrection. Amen.