

Sermon: "Press On"

We just heard Jesus' words, according to the Gospel writer John, "In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me." As a 'first movement' of this sermon, join me in a "Bible Study" moment and be reminded of something we have observed, studied and understood before: In that Christian Community gathered around John and his writing, it is quite literally true (and significantly distinctive) when community members hear *what no other Gospel or New Testament writer reports*, and Jesus says – about the time beyond his death – "The world will no longer see me, but you will see me", "I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you", "I will love [those that love me] and reveal myself to them." The centerpiece of Christian practice for this Johannine community is their ongoing altered state of consciousness experiences of Jesus ... their visions in which Jesus – yes – "comes to them". The many resurrection stories that John records are prototypes for what all community members regularly undergo. Which celebrated distinctive constitutes them (anthropologically speaking) as an "anti-society" *in opposition to all others, including all other Christian communities*; what's more, what we read in all their "**abiding** in Jesus" talk is what scholars call (and what Paula, through Heather, reminded us about last week) [it is their] "anti-language" giving insider **expression, form and hype** concerning their identity and faith.

We, in the modern West, have for many generations been enculturated *away* from everyday visionary experiences; but – as we *here in MacNeill* have pondered before – we in the modern Western **Church** are arguably very-much, *like* that Johannine community, an anti-society. It is not altered state of consciousness experience but rather fully-engaged cognitive, emotional, social, *meaning-seeking* (which is to say "spiritual") **experience of Jesus** that has us, *with integrity* (though a different integrity from that second century Johannine community) **seeing ourselves included** as Jesus says (*again* from today's Gospel

reading), "They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them."

So much so are we involved in **Jesus's Way**, convinced of its correctness, convicted by the truth of what Jesus says and does, that it is *our shared pronouncement*, "He is Saviour!". Again, people, *long ago* have we at MacNeill stopped with the narrowly individualistic theology that – with this claim – finds so many Christians fixated on their spot in heaven because "Jesus died for me". No!, "He is Saviour" because the **Way of Christ** (capital "W" "Way") is necessary in order to save the world. If that understanding wasn't experientially obvious a generation ago, it really ought to be now, as critical observers from one studied discipline after another sound a shared *and growing* alarm: politically, economically, socially, environmentally we on planet Earth in the year 2023 C.E. are in a meta-crisis. Our institutions are incapable of pulling us out of the mess because – structurally, dynamically, intrinsically – **they** are its perpetrators. Something *more*, something *beyond* all of them, is needed to save us here. It is in this sense that Jesus is Saviour.

His Way

- of **love**, of **truth**, of **healing**, of **forgiveness**;
- [His Way] of **Jubilee** ... remember "Jubilee"?, wherein
 - enslaved are freed,
 - land is equitably re-apportioned so that all people have 'place' and resources, and
 - power is used for service and not gain;
- [His Way] of **right worship** – only God is to be worshipped; not Mammon, never any idolized object or behaviour, entertainment or dependency (none of *these* things worth sacrificing anyone or anything for!);

[... **Jesus'** Way] is Truth and Life in answer to (i) the distortions, and (ii) the death-threat-to-the-Earth, in which humanity madly lives and moves and has our being.

We know this. We believe this. And, in anti-society mode, we find ourselves, like Paul did in Athens, surrounded by people worshipping all the wrong things, [we ourselves] trying to find some means to connect, convince, indeed convict, and convert them. Paul had little hope up against the Epicureans mentioned in Acts 17, verse 18, for Epicureans *flat out* denied divine providence or judgement, let alone life after death. It was to the Stoics (mentioned in that same verse) that Paul made his case, using concepts *they commonly accepted*: that this unknown God found in their midst *is creator*; that this unknown God beneficently puts **order** into the creation; and that unknown God's action is as a **just judge** of humankind. Paul even quotes the Stoic poet Aratus, "For we too are his offspring". Luke reports that some in the crowd were moved enough to ask *to hear more* another time, and a small number actually joined Paul on the spot.

It is neither Epicureans or Stoics whom we are up against; it is post-modernists, whose philosophy steers the individual adherent clear of all external authority (certainly anything like church) in favour of what is 'put together' **by**, and **for**, *oneself*. The many top-of-people's-minds failures of the Church (paedophile priests and other sex scandals, financial scandals, historical colonialism and residential schools, complicity in ongoing oppression of (i) women, (ii) 2SLGBTQQIA+ and (iii) BIPOC communities) [... all these failures] **and alongside them a grand bunch of magical thinking** on the part of so many inside the Church ... **it all arguably makes** it not just easy but pretty much logical to be post-modern and get oneself away-and-free. **But** we on the inside? ... we find ourselves

- Yes, humbled and repentant for the broad Church's sins;
- But, we also are **drawn** to be ***focused*** (using all the critical apparatus that can be brought to bear) [***focused***] on Jesus (... **having discovered-and-experienced just how fully-and-truly he is Saviour** (... his **Way IS** Salvation!).

- **And we on-the-inside**, *in* the greying and dwindling of our community (like most churches in Canada) are by-this-very-attrition constantly confronted by the fact that *even* our best efforts “to make our defense to anyone who demands from us an accounting for the hope that is in us” ... those *best efforts* spent on our own children and grandchildren as they grow (or grew) up in our homes and the Church ... [our *best* efforts] – *except for in a few precious cases* – have **failed** over the draw of post-modernism. (I pause here to lament, for it is deeply discouraging ... I know it confounds if not breaks my heart that my children and grandchildren are ‘outside’.)
- **So**, “Oh my, *yes!*”, in the midst of but in opposition to the postmodern world, it is very much *an anti-society* that we together **are in here**. And here is the terrible irony we *live*: that **THE ANSWER** to (i) the **storms, fires, floods and food insecurity** of Climate Change; (ii) the **divisions** (*to-the-extent* of warring and brokenness in economy, politics and society-at-large); (iii) the rampant **addictions** and **mental illness** and **family dysfunctions** that the dominant society faces (and we face with them) [... **THE ANSWER**] is **in here** with us ... more particularly, the answer is **in Christ** (in the Jubilee, in the love, in the right worship, of “Jesus’ Way”).

Good people, here is where Gospel (Good News) – indeed the *whole* biblical tradition, *all* of Salvation History – shows up (it is needed to show up!) *for us*, with hope today. The seven weeks of the season of Easter keep echoing the message that we need right down to the core of our souls: The message is “Easter Sunday follows Good Friday”. God’s pattern persists across all human history (for any with eyes to see). The movement goes in (i) Old Testament through New, and in (ii) all history before and since; [the movement goes] *just as I preached back on Easter Sunday*; [the movement goes] *from captivity to release, from exile to return, from darkness to light, from ‘ending’ to ‘a remnant goes on’, from*

death *to* resurrection. Not that we make it happen (or ever could make it happen), but that God has ***made it be that it happens***. Our part, in the place and time we find ourselves, is simply to be faith-ful (to engage life *fully* and *in faith*). So, yes, we study and practice and celebrate Christianity; we “make our defense to anyone who demands from us an accounting for the hope that is in us”; we speak prophetically to our world; we love our world and its people, for Christ’s sake; we pursue the righteousness of Jesus (and of the prophets) in all of our living. **We do not control where the overall process is at** (let me repeat this very important point: **we do not control where the overall process is at**) ... it may be that **the process** (and we inside of it) are heading into exile, or captivity, or even into ending/death. When we ‘picked up the cross to follow [Jesus]’, it was supposed to be evident that the subsequent journey would be no cake walk! But, **ultimately *in every case***, there is **God *Who makes*** the release, the return, the resurrection, the remnant happen out of ‘what is currently here on the face of God’s creation’.

In our present experience – let me close with this pastoral observation – whenever there is fear, or disappointment, or discouragement, or felt-abandonment in our ‘take on the state of the world, and of the place of the Church in it’, we are to find ourselves there in today’s Gospel reading with those disciples in the tension (the threat) of Maundy Thursday, their last supper with Jesus ended and his arrest and crucifixion just ahead. Hear Jesus, again, say to them and us, “I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. ... They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.” What we have to do, all we can do, all we need to do – like them – is ‘Press on!’. Amen.