

A TRUE AND PRESENT PARADISE

No matter what the calendar says, there is no help for it: This is an Easter Sermon. We cannot really talk about the True Paradise without Easter themes floating all around it and bearing it up. On the other hand, *every* Sunday is Easter Sunday! That is why Christians worship on Sunday. We broke from the Ten Commandments – broke from worshipping on the Sabbath – partly to prove that we really did trust Jesus’ authority, but also because we knew we could not live the New Life in Christ Jesus if we were not constantly reminded of the power that carries it, and the power by which He proved it. Even during the most solemn season of the Christian Year – the forty days of Lent, when we remember all the harsh circumstances that led to the Cross – we are supposed to come up for air each Sunday. Sunday is the Lord’s Day – Sunday is for celebrating the Resurrection – so we never count Sundays when we count the forty days of Lent. You cannot be sad on Sunday – it is forbidden. He lives! He lives! It’s Easter!

Let’s talk for a minute about the concept of Paradise. Jesus said to one of the thieves being crucified beside Him: “*Today you will be with me in paradise.*” (Luke 23:43) What does that mean to you? Well, to a lot of us that means: “If that thief made it, maybe there’s a chance for me too.” But I am asking you about the other end of the question. What fate was Jesus declaring to the thief beside Him? Was he going to God’s version of Disneyland? Was he going to a place where all the women are beautiful and willing, and the wine makes you high but never drunk? If it had been a thiefess next to Jesus, what would that Paradise look like? All the men are rich and generous and courteous, love to listen to you talk, and genuinely agree with everything you say?

Sprinkled with streets of gold, lots of harp playing, and undefined longings that get instantly and totally gratified, Paradise is a vague concept at best, and often rather silly. Humans rarely *want* what is good for them. We rarely *know* what is good for us. It is much easier to tempt us toward a Fool’s Paradise if we neither know nor want what is genuinely good, or valuable, or satisfying, or true.

The Adventures of Pinocchio, the great Christian Primer of the nineteenth century, pictures our confusion with exquisite irony. The boys are invited to come away from school and all unpleasant duties, disciplines, and responsibilities. They are taken to Pleasure Island (their

notion of Paradise), where everybody gets to do exactly what he wants, at all times, until they all make asses of themselves. Pinocchio, on the very brink of assification, finally manages – by deeds of great courage and sacrificial love – to reverse the process and finally turn into a real person. The story is not very subtle. True Paradise is home, and school, and self-discipline, and responsibility, and becoming more and more a true person (a mensch). What Pinocchio started out thinking was Paradise, was really Hell. The story is not very subtle, yet clearly much of our society has never read or “heard” it.

What Jesus really said to the thief was: “I can tell from what you just said that your soul has come alive. So you are coming with me to a place where you can grow into your true being and destiny.”

Some technicalities for those who are interested: Paradise (*paradesios*) literally means a walled-off garden. All our great words start from humble, earthy beginnings. There is no spiritual language, so we use earthbound concepts and try to make them point toward what we mean. A message-bearer, the postman, becomes “angel.” “About face” becomes repentance. Missing the target becomes “sin.” Someone paying the debt you owe becomes “redemption.” The Garden of Eden, of course, is the earliest “garden paradise” of our tradition. The concept has moved from there to mean “Heaven, the abode of righteous souls after death.” That is from the dictionary – not always the best theological source. Some of you may come from a tradition that sees Paradise as an intermediate resting place for souls awaiting the Day of Resurrection. Not to be confused with Purgatory, a holding area for souls that have made it but have to wait around until Heaven is officially opened. We do get tangled up in our own constructs ...

There are two non-matching traditions in Christendom. One says we are each processed individually at the time of our death (like the thief on the cross). The other says that Heaven cannot begin until the full story is finished here, and then, on the Day of Resurrection, we all get processed at the same time (the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory). This second construct is tied up with an early picture of a tiny cosmos in which the only room for Heaven is right here, on a reconstructed earth. The dead have to wait until the current phase of earth history is played out because the earth is already occupied – there is no place else to put Heaven, at least not the Heaven for humans. You would do well to abandon this second view – just as many of you have finally concluded

that the earth is *not* flat, that space is *not* made of water, and that Creation did *not* take place six to ten thousand years ago. God is always bigger than our minds can grasp, and so are God's purposes and plans for us.

So the Bible is full of images which reveal the limitations of human thinking and information at any given time. You do not get extra points for believing what is now clearly absurd. That does not further faith; it freezes it in a bygone age, and condemns the church to being a museum piece, instead of a living fellowship of Jesus' followers. "*You shall worship the Lord your God with all of your mind.*" If there were no new thoughts for you to think, no new ways of understanding, no new efforts to walk the Life in Christ Jesus, then God would have shut this place down already, don't you think? Please feel Jesus inviting you to bring all of your faith, all of your love, and all of your devotion right on into the current century. More than half of Christendom is still stuck somewhere back in the 1400s. Another ten percent has gone off into woo-woo land – a future that will never exist, a hodgepodge of theological wishful thinking without grounding in tradition or revelation. Both ends of the spectrum have comfort and caring for some people, and both have elements of truth of course. But Jesus needs people in each new generation who will be more faithful, more responsive, more obedient to the Holy Spirit – the *Living Christ* – than either of those approaches will allow.

"If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry." (Colossians 3:1-5)

We all make up our minds, inadequate as they seem to us. There really is a New Kingdom, or this world is all there is. We really do want to get NEW ourselves, or we are stuck in a wooden-puppet land with no higher goal than Pleasure Island. Most important of all, at least to me, is the realization that the people of the true church live their lives for this New Kingdom from the time of their conversions onward. They do not sit around waiting for some vague and distant Heaven. They do *not* – as so many church folk do today – separate the life they live in the present from the life they intend to believe in and hope for in some future. Please do not misunderstand me: They clearly believe in the future, by whatever

images they have. They trust God for the future and know it will be wonderful, and far greater than this broken, alienated realm we live in now. But they live for the New Kingdom **HERE AND NOW**, and nothing else matters in comparison. Therefore, they *experience* Paradise now, as well as live toward it. They know the love of Christ in the present, not just as a future promise. They are excited about the values of the Kingdom they find all around them, and they do not cop out with excuses about how hard it is here by saying they cannot be faithful until later.

You are *already* living your eternal life! The Kingdom is *both* here and coming. We live “IN but not OF the world.” The time to be faithful, and stay true, and honor Christ’s love is NOW. “*The Kingdom of God is in the midst of you.*” (Luke 17:21)

Isn’t that interesting: A Fool’s Paradise is *always* in the future. The True Paradise is with us the moment we awaken and begin to live for it. A Fool’s Paradise focuses on things so pitiful, paltry, and petty that it is impossible to deliver on the promises. Perhaps a better way to say the same thing: The promises of a Fool’s Paradise, if delivered, are so far from what we really wanted that they turn to ashes in our hands. But the True Paradise delivers constantly, and continually surprises us with blessings and benefits far beyond anything we had imagined.

Remember last week’s sermon? Did the Apostle Paul live a hard life, or a good life? He lived an extremely hard life. However, he was one of the happiest men who ever lived. His life was full of adventure, friends, love, purpose, accomplishment – full, most of all, of the challenge and joy of Christ’s presence with him. Hell was all around him, and he knew it and felt it. But he lived in and for Paradise, and his life was shaped by it and for it as he went. And always in the background you can hear his theme playing: “He lives! He lives! It’s Easter!”

Over and over, I feel and experience Paradise in the life and efforts of this church. Oh, not every day in every way. Where do you think we are?! And sometimes, of course, it is all around me but I miss it. Or it is here and I ruin it. But over and over, I feel the rejoicing as I feel Paradise already at work: a Deacons’ meeting; a prayer vigil; groups of all kinds and ages meeting to learn and share; caring, love, support, concern being acted out, and acted upon; individuals making new decisions, moving toward deeper life in Christ. It is really quite overwhelming, once your soul gets tuned to it.

But I have made my point, insofar as I am able, and I am tired of being serious. You have been very receptive to this series, and I am grateful. Let me close the series with a simple little story from out of the past, and maybe it won't even change the subject very much.

* * *

The old man had been a devoted churchman all his life, but he came from the Southern Baptist tradition. Somewhere along the line, his wife had died, and rumor had it that his children had grown ashamed of him, now that he had fallen on hard times. He had wandered out of Texas and somehow ended up in East Whittier, back in the '40s. He worked as a custodian – they called them janitors in those days. The old man had barely enough to pay the rent, buy his food, and keep body and soul together, though many would have been surprised to learn that he tithed to the church, giving more than some folks with three and four times his income. For him it was just part of his way of life. In East Whittier in the '40s, there were no Southern Baptist churches, so the old man went to the Friends Church (outsiders called them Quakers).

Well, the old man had been more than a casual student of the Bible for a lot of years, and when the preacher got onto some of the great themes, you could almost see it working through his soul and up into his face, and pretty soon he would start muttering, "Amen ... Yes, Lord, that's right ..." and other such pleasantries. And if the preacher didn't let up or get off track, the old man would get louder and more enthusiastic as he felt the Message warm his soul.

Well, the poor Quakers weren't used to such overt displays of noise or emotion, though they had once been famous for such expression themselves – as you would know if you thought for thirty seconds about their nickname. Anyway, the weeks passed, and more and more folk became alarmed, though some were content to let the old man worship however he pleased. Finally, the Elders met to discuss the emergency. They were mostly afraid that the outbursts were distracting others from worship, and they worried that the visitors would be put off and never come again. So they went to visit the old man and explain their dilemma. They told him how Quakers were extremely sedate and fond of silence, and that they meant no disrespect to his faith, but could he possibly keep silent during the worship services. The old man was extremely sorry, and quite embarrassed. He promised he would try to not be disruptive in the future.

Everything went fine for a few weeks, and people started to relax ... until the preacher got to preaching one Sunday from the eighth chapter of Romans: *“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death.”* Well, mortal flesh can only withstand so much, and as the preacher waxed eloquent, the old man was transformed, and soon the air was filled with “Hallelujahs” and “Praises to God” and “Amens.” The preacher didn’t seem to mind and made no effort to slack off, so it went on for quite some time.

Several days later, the Elders went to visit the old man again. They told him they valued his presence, wanted his membership, and understood that he didn’t mean to be causing a disturbance – that he was only carried away with what in many churches would be considered a very appropriate response. But, they said, this just wasn’t right in a Quaker church. What they had decided, they told the old man, was that he needed some greater incentive to keep quiet. They knew, from conversations around the parish, that the old man was perpetually cold. And as winter was coming on, it was always a trial for him to sleep at night, for he could neither pay the extra expense to light his gas furnace nor pay to purchase more blankets. The Elders said they wanted to make a deal with him. If he would promise to be silent in church, they would take up a collection and buy him *five* warm and wonderful top-grade wool blankets. He in turn agreed that if he caused a disturbance again, he would return the blankets.

It worked wonderfully well, and everybody was happy. From time to time, you could see the old man twitch or squirm a bit when the sermon got really good. But things remained peaceful, and the problem seemed solved at last. Everything was wonderful through October, November, December, January. The old man slept warm, and the congregation prayed in peace and quiet.

Then one Sunday in late January, the preacher started preaching from Second Corinthians, chapter five: *“For the love of Christ controls us, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, that those who live might live no longer for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised. From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once regarded Christ from a human point of view, we regard him thus no longer. Therefore, if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation;*

*the old has passed away, behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; **that is, God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting our trespasses against us, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.***” (II Corinthians 5:14-19)

Well, it was the old man’s favorite passage. As the preacher discussed verse after verse, the Elders could see that the old man was in trouble. He was squirming in his seat, his face was transfixed, his knuckles were white with the effort to hold it in. And when the preacher started lining out that final verse – “*God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting our trespasses against us, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation*” – well, the old man finally lost it. He rose out of his pew as if a legion of angels were bearing him up, and from his mouth came a cry of pure, ecstatic praise and joy: “Blankets or no blankets – HALLELUJAH!”

No one ever got an accurate count, nor did anyone care, but the angels reached many others there that morning – including, they say, most of the Elders. And the congregation echoed in reply, “HALLELUJAH!”

Did that old man live in a Fool’s Paradise? Do I wish for all of you the simple, profound, enduring love and praise that old man felt for his Savior? With or without the noise, indeed I do. Blankets or no blankets ...