

NOTHING TO WORSHIP

When it comes to the religious life, there are those who take no interest; those who try to use it for their own ends; those who feel no need; and those who hunger for it and go after it with ever-increasing fervor.

Last week we were talking about spiritual tourism. These are the four tourist classes: no interest; use it for my own ends; no need; and go for it.

When I was in seminary (and before and after, whenever I study the Christian Faith) it seemed like the opposition was Satan, or evil. It must take some mighty power to hold back the tides of Christendom and subvert God's purpose for abundant LIFE for everyone. I looked for monsters: Satan; evil people; horrible doubts that corrupt hope; fatal flaws that turn us at last off the Path no matter how much we try to stay faithful. All of these things seemed relevant to me and my own experience. As a matter of fact, they still do. I wrestle with such things, and have all my life. And I know a few others who do too. I go on studying and training with such things in mind because they are part of reality as far as I am concerned.

But such things do not seem to be part of the picture for many other people. And I have noticed over the years that at least outwardly, the church is crippled far more by people sleeping in on Sunday morning than it is by people wrestling with Satan. Christ's purpose is killed by yawns and boredom more than by evil or greed. Lots of folk seem too spiritually asleep to be very troubled by the doubts that shake the saints.

In short, lots of people simply do not have much interest in life beyond death; life beyond food; life beyond money; life beyond the coming weekend. It's not so much that they do not know there is more to life than *their* job, *their* home, and *their* retirement plan. It's that they do not care. There is no real interest.

1.) A social worker in San Jose, California, knocked on the door of a pitiful house. A woman opened the door a crack, put her foot against it, and said through the opening: "You needn't come in here. Me and my husband ain't got no interest in nothin'!"

It is, of course, part of the tragedy of poverty that it reduces human life to such a state. Poverty cuts back all energy and resources until there is no room for any outside interests. Likewise, having no interest in anything produces poverty. And there is more than one kind of poverty. Some people are so religiously impoverished that they have no interest in any of the dimensions of the spiritual life. It does not mean, as some of them suspect, that religion is irrelevant, that Christianity is uninteresting, or that the spiritual life is inauthentic. They are simply too spiritually poor to have any interest in such things. They know too little about it to be inspired. *“To those who have will more be given, and from those who have not, even what they have will be taken away.”* (Luke 19:26)

Yet, again and again, when people get a taste, a whiff, even some small experience of spiritual reality, they suddenly turn into ravenous seekers. How rarely it works the other way! I’m simply reminding us all not to be worried, nervous, or fretful by those who try to make us feel that there is something naive or silly about our hunger to be awake to spiritual things. They are the ones who are impoverished. In fact, we ourselves are still spiritually poor enough that we do not have time to stop and dawdle along the way or to settle for being even more poor. The truth is, some people simply have no interest. They are not going to be touring at all. That is no reason for us to stop or get off the Path.

2.) If it is true that some people have no interest, there is also a class of tourists who see everything through self-centered eyes. They care only about “What can I get out of it?” It’s sort of fun to have these folk on the tour because they add a lot of spice. They are invariably the loudest and the most enthusiastic among us. They push in line, crowd to be first, ask the most questions, and are always the most eager to get on with it and go see more.

However, their questions are all variations on three themes:

- Do I want to take a picture of it?
- Do I want to buy it?
- Is it a possible investment?

As soon as those three questions are taken care of, it is time to move on to something else. For these people, Alaska had no life, no vistas, no vastness of its own. It was only there for what it might give to them. Well, Alaska *did* have a lot to give to them. But there is an inescapable

irony or sadness to the fact that this was all there was to it for some tourists. That's a lot of ground to cover just to go shopping. It's just another variation on the "slaughter the buffalo" mentality.

Some people seem to approach religion on the same level. If you talk about prayer, all they care about is how they can make it work for them. If you consider healing, their only interest is in whether or not they can find and use the power. Jesus is just another influential friend, God is a "Sugar Daddy," and none of the grandeur or LIFE or glory of Christianity – or that which it points to – is noticed.

Of course, the loudest and most enthusiastic church people are from this class of tourists also, at least until some of the trinkets run out. The saddest thing is not their own impact on the church, but that they themselves never see or touch what Christendom is really about.

I'm reminded of the overweight fellow who always stopped by the bakery on his way to work each morning to pick up some goodies for the staff coffee break, most of which he ate himself. Finally he decided to go on a diet, and, in order to avoid temptation, he took a different route to work. Everybody in the office encouraged him and things seemed to be going well until one day when an errand took him into the neighborhood where the bakery was. As he approached the area, he said to himself, "Maybe God wants me to stop by the bakery this morning and pick up some goodies for the office staff." So he prayed, "God, if you want me to stop at the bakery, leave a parking spot open right in front so there will be no question about it." Sure enough, there it was: a parking spot right in front of the bakery door – and on only his eighth trip around the block.

Ah, yes, God answers prayer. And don't the scriptures teach that we must be persistent? How nice to have a religion that "works" for us. (Never mind one that calls us also to dimensions and goals and perspectives far beyond us.)

3.) Some folk have no interest. Some folk just use it – try to work it for their own self-centered ends. Some people have no need of it, at least not for themselves. To them, Christianity might be helpful to children, to weak women and confused men, and probably to a number of other insecure types, "But I've got it together, I'm doing fine the way I am, and I have no personal needs. I am quite self-sufficient and in control – thankyouverymuch."

On the tour we were on, these folk were the sophisticates. They had already been to every place. They had been on many tours, and everything was “old hat” for them. There was no enthusiasm, no excitement. They had seen everything, done everything, and been everywhere, and they were determined that nothing was going to impress or surprise them. No matter what was said or pointed out, their response was “Oh yes, ho hum.” They had seen it before, more and better in “When was it? Oh yes, that time back in ’77.” It was difficult to understand why they had come on yet another cruise, but we could not come right out and ask, and they never said.

Some folk have been around the church forever. They grew up with it, you know. Nothing surprises or enthuses or excites them anymore. They seem very loyal and are always on the tour, but it is hard to figure out why. While they always come, they never seem to enjoy. While they always pay their way, they never seem to act like it is worth it. Somehow they give the impression that they have graduated and no longer need conversion or repentance; forgiveness or grace; salvation or new guidance for their lives. Maybe now they take the tour just to watch other tourists touring, instead of for themselves. We cannot come right out and ask them, and they never say.

Proud, self-sufficient, self-contained, in control – such an attitude is not well-recommended in the Scriptures. There was an officer in the Navy who had always dreamed of commanding a battleship. Finally he realized that dream and was given commission of the newest, proudest battleship in the fleet. One stormy night, as the ship plowed through the seas, the Captain spotted a strange light off the port bow rapidly closing in on his own vessel.

Immediately he ordered the signalman to flash the message to the unidentified craft: “Alter your course ten degrees to the south.” Only a moment had passed before the reply came back: “Alter *your* course ten degrees to the north.”

Well, the new captain was not about to have HIS ship take a backseat to anybody, so he snapped the order for the message to be sent: “Alter your course ten degrees – this is the CAPTAIN!” The response beamed back: “Alter *your* course ten degrees – I am Seaman Third Class Jones.”

Infuriated by now, the Captain grabbed the signal light in his own hands and fired off the message: “Alter your course – I am a battleship!” The reply came back: “Alter *your* course – I am a lighthouse.”

In this world so full of rank and title and pride and importance, it is sometimes easy to forget the innate authority that still and always outranks us – and where the light that truly matters comes from.

4.) Someone in the fourth class is no longer just a tourist, but is a true journeyman – a seeker. Such people no longer simply travel; they hunger for and seek LIFE with God. What they find on the journey that helps toward this end is received and accepted with gratitude. What does not further this end is sidestepped or ignored. While the present is the moment to be lived and the time to be aware, there is a future and a hope that, together with the past, guide and inspire the present.

During the terrible bombardments of Great Britain by the Nazis, Winston Churchill constantly reminded his countrymen that they had to draw upon the future to make it through the present. That is essentially what the believer does in this world: takes a withdrawal on the future Life with God to make it through this present world. Of course, Churchill’s perspective and influence were mostly appropriate to wartime conditions. On the other hand, spiritually speaking, I have never lived in peace time. Neither have any of you, no matter how much we sometimes try to act like it. In this world, spiritually speaking, it is always wartime. Inner peace is the only relief we get.

Nevertheless, some people are on the journey to know and be with God. Dr. Leslie Weatherhead wrote: “I feel that the Gospel writers mean life in harmony with God. Life always is correspondence with the relevant environment. The life of my eye is the ability to correspond with its relevant environment, which is light. The life of my ear ceases if its correspondence with sound ceases. Similarly the life of the soul is its correspondence with its relevant environment – which is God.”
(Life Begins at Death)

Rufus Jones, perhaps the greatest Quaker writer of all, wrote: “‘Eternal Life’ is the entrance upon an absolutely satisfying experience whether here or elsewhere, in which the soul has found itself joined indissolubly with its Object, revealed to us best in Beauty, Truth,

Goodness, and Love. These values can never pass into nothingness, nor can the soul, that in God is united to these Realities. In them one lives, by them one lives, they are his life, and it opens out inwardly with ever intensified joy and insight.” (*The Radiant Life*)

So which shall it be?

1. “I ain’t got no interest in nothin’.”
2. “After only the eighth time around the block”
(we get what we want).
3. “I am a battleship!”
4. The soul in “correspondence with its relevant environment – which is God.”

Spiritually speaking, we are poverty-stricken; we are self-centered enough to think only about how it might “work” for us; we are too proud and self-sufficient to need it; or we want to know God and be with God because of who and what God is.

I was thinking the other day about worship and how some people think worship is primitive, immature, no fun, or an irrelevant waste of time. I got this strange shuddering thought: “What would it be like if there was nothing to worship?” Has it been a duty – a requirement – for so long that we think we would like to be rid of it? Have we, in our nation and culture, been getting rid of it for a long while now – and is that part of our mayhem?

Today is my way of introducing the topic. Next week it will *be* the topic. Would you really like a life without anything (anyone) to worship? Do you already have such a life? What does it mean to worship? After all this time, should we ask? Dare we ask?