

Easter 7 – May 24_2020 Cycle A

We all know the story, how “in the beginning God created” human beings, placed them in paradise, and set out to establish a lasting relationship with them. Adam and Eve were given everything anyone might want: life, companionship, safety, food in abundance... All God asked in return was trust – to heed God’s word and not eat of “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil”. For God knew that if Adam and Eve trusted in God’s benevolence, wisdom, and good character, they would heed His instructions. If instead they preferred to trust in “their own ideas”, they would not honor God’s direction, but follow their own “way”. Genesis tells us that that is exactly what Adam and Eve did. Swayed by the serpent’s words, they chose “to be like God” and decide good and evil for themselves. Adam and Eve, therefore, broke God’s trust, the relationship God had sought to have with them, and they were cast out of paradise – the consequence of their choice.

We all know the story, how the Hebrews were once captive in Egypt – enslaved on account of the Egyptian’s fear and greed. It’s a perfect example of human beings deciding “right and wrong” for themselves. The Egyptians chose to set their needs above those of other peoples, forgetting that Joseph, a Hebrew, had been God’s instrument sent to preserve Egypt and the surrounding nations during a time of terrible famine. When the danger passed, Egypt “forgot” its dependence on others and made choices solely to suit itself. Joseph’s family, trapped in Egypt and suffering greatly, cried out to God for rescue. At the right time, God responded to their pleas and sent Moses to lead the Hebrews out of captivity. God wrested Joseph’s family out of Egyptian hands and led them through the Red Sea – a miracle signifying birth. Once again God sought to build a relationship with human beings. It would begin with the forging of a new nation, Israel – a people dedicated to being God’s emissaries in the world. Before Mount Sinai, God set out the terms of a great contract, a Covenant between God and Israel. The conditions were straightforward: God would be Israel’s God and they would be God’s people. The great contract consisted of just ten simple commandments, rules outlining Israel’s obligations to God and to one another. But hardly before the “ink” was dry, Israel broke the contract and sought after “other gods”. Once more, human beings opted to choose “right and wrong” for themselves – severing the relationship between God and humanity.

We all know the story, how despite Israel’s failing, God established them in the Promised Land. Beset by enemies, however, Israel’s 12 tribes refused to come to each other’s mutual defense. Each did, as the Bible tells us, “what was right in their own eyes”. God had appointed judges over each tribe, to govern them according to God’s Character, but they proved corrupt – incapable of governing rightly. Once again, the people cried out – yet not for God – but for a king to lead them as kings led other peoples. Though God warned them against their choice, God relented and appointed Saul to lead them against their enemies. Afterwards, all that God had said came true. Israel’s kings – virtually all of them – proved faithless, inept, and corrupt. Each made choices to suit himself, largely ignoring God’s Law and the words of God’s prophets. After centuries of effort, God eventually left Israel to suffer the consequences of its choices. What was left of the people were taken captive and carried off to Babylon. Even so, God did not abandon them utterly. After about 2 generations, God restored the people to their land. But things were not as they had been. Israel was not “free”, but continually under the control of “greater” kings and nations. Remembering the ancient prophesies, the people cried

out for a Savior, for God's Messiah to come to rescue them.

We all know the story, how at the right time Jesus was born in Bethlehem – God's answer to the people's prayers. The time seemed especially ripe. The "Herodians" were among Israel's most ruthless and corrupt kings, "perfect servants" of the hated Romans. Jesus grew up during these turbulent years, living a life of honest work and compassion for neighbor. When the time came for him to speak, Jesus was anointed for service in the River Jordan, a commission proclaimed by God's Holy Spirit! Jesus had come to restore a right relationship between God and human beings – becoming human himself, to set a trustworthy example and make it possible for others to follow. God would no longer work through an ordinary familial lineage, but would forge a new family through Jesus the Anointed – adopting all who would follow as his sisters and brothers. Most people, however, refused to heed God's Word in Jesus, preferring to choose their own "path" instead. Yet even as he was being betrayed to the death, Jesus prayed for God's deliverance – not for himself, but for those who struggled to follow: who had experienced God's love and desired to love God and neighbor in return... "Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, and we are one" (John 17:11). As God the Father and Jesus Christ the Son were one in family, so Jesus desired that his followers would be one with each other. Jesus gave himself utterly so that this might be made true.

We all know the story; Jesus was rejected by all those who desired a path "of their own choosing" above a relationship with God. Faithful to the end, Jesus died on the cross simply for proclaiming God's desire to establish a loving relationship with human beings. Yet such was God's love, that God would not let it die with Jesus' body. On the third day, God raised Jesus from the dead, that all people might know that they have a choice other than the "human" way! God offers life eternal to all who desire to be part of God's family and devote themselves to being members of it – following the principle of the ancient Covenant: love God and neighbor as self! To make his disciples understand and convince them to keep going even in the face of death, Jesus appeared to his disciples repeatedly over the 40 days after his resurrection. He taught and reassured them; he inspired their faith and gave them courage. Jesus even permitted many to see him lifted up into heaven, that they might know that "at the right time" he will come again in the same way!

We all know the story – or at least we should. Many people believed the testimony of Jesus' disciples, eyewitnesses to the power of God's love. From God's ancient Promised Land, word of God's love in Jesus the Anointed has spread across the earth, and on account of God's Holy Spirit many more have "come to believe, and believing, to have life in Christ's name!" The story, however, is not over. Word of God's love is still spreading, still reaching those in every generation who are willing to live, not as "they see fit", but as God calls us to! These are the Church, God's Assembled people. We seek to live as Jesus' taught, to be Jesus' sisters and brothers even when it is not easy or popular – not for ourselves, but for the sake of those who have yet to experience and be changed by God's love and forgiveness! Even so, many still refuse to accept God's offer of relationship. As God does not hate them, neither do we. Instead, following Jesus' example we pray for them and ask forgiveness for their errors, that they too may become part of God's family and have life in Jesus' name! Amen