

WHAT MAKES A TRUE CHRISTIAN?

Psalm 130; Lamentations 3: 22-26; Mark 5: 21-43

Two years ago now, several newspapers ran an article by Michael Coren. Coren is a well-known columnist, author, public speaker, radio host and television talk show host. He is also a Christian. For the longest time, he was known as a very conservative Christian with some strong moral views. But something happened to Coren. He changed his mind on same-sex marriage. Once that door opened in his heart, other doors opened also.

But Coren's article was not about his changing views. Rather, he was writing about the vicious reaction he received by those who were one-time supporters of his in the church. He was threatened and bullied in person and on-line. Malicious things were posted about him, his family and his background, much of them lies. Coren was shocked by the kind of hatred he experienced by people who called themselves Christians and one-time friends.

Clearly, these people believed that Coren was now a threat to the true faith. True Christianity must be defended from false distortions and false beliefs. But is this so? Is Christianity primarily about what we believe? Or, is there something even more primal behind our beliefs that make a true Christian?

Let's ponder our scripture readings for some guidance. And in this regard, let me make three points.

1) First of all, experience is more primary than beliefs. And the experience that counts most of all for a Christian is love. Christianity begins and ends with an experience that God is love. I may experience such love suddenly or over time. I may experience such love through the people around me, through worship, meditation, spiritual community and fellowship. I may experience God's love in nature, music, theatre, a book, through various circumstances and situations that open me up to experience God anew in my life. But however it happens and however often it happens, to be a Christian first and foremost is to experience that beyond the chaos, hate, indifference and selfishness in our world, God's love is the deepest foundation of my life.

And this is exactly what our reading from Lamentations tells us. The author, maybe Jeremiah, is lamenting the loss of so much in his life that gave meaning and joy to him. But he also points to what he calls the "steadfast love" of God. The word is "*hesed*" in Hebrew and "*agape*" in Greek. Steadfast love is by far the most consistent descriptor for God throughout the bible.

But how is Jeremiah supposed to experience such love from God when life is so hard and sad for him right now? He must experience it in a new way. The old way was fine in the past. Now that he is living new realities, the steadfast love of God that has always been there in the past must be experienced "new every morning." New realities, new

challenges, new relationships... they require new experiences of God's love. Old experiences are not enough. They have to become new.

People who are judgemental, people who live and react out of fear or hate; such people are disconnected from the love of God. They may claim they are defending moral values. They may claim they are defending the true faith. But if they are not inspired by the love of God, new every morning, new after difficult and challenging times of life... if they are not inspired by the love of God in their heart, then they are not serving God, but rather, the evil, toxic, judgemental, reactive and hateful currents so prevalent in our world. The steadfast love of God is the beginning and end of true Christianity.

2) And this brings me to my second point, and to Psalm 130. Sometimes, waiting for God and an experience of God's love can take a very long time: "I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in God's word I hope... more than those who watch for the morning..." And sometimes, our waiting is more like a crying to God from deep places of pain in us: "out of the depths I cry to you, O God."

And sometimes, the pain, the hurt, the worry and the fear can be so bad, that we think maybe we are responsible for the trouble we're in. Whether we are responsible in some way or not, we can get paranoid. We are imperfect after all, no? We are responsible for something, somewhere, no? We can blame God. We can blame others. We can blame the system. We can blame drugs or alcohol or any number of things. Or we can blame ourselves, whether there is truth to the blame or not.

The problem with blame, however, is that it doesn't go anywhere. We put our energy into blaming, but what about a solution, a path, a constructive way to work through the problem and find a way to restore and renew our humanity and the humanity of others? How will we change the situation? How will we find better, more life-giving ways to live it? How will we find meaning so that we experience blessing in our lives and are able to bless others also with what we've lived through or are living now?

The Psalmist does not stay in a state of crying out of the depths. He doesn't just stay in a state of waiting for the morning for something better to come. He also appeals to the forgiveness of God. The steadfast love of the Lord has to meet him as forgiveness.

Forgiveness means I know I am not perfect and sometimes quite imperfect. Forgiveness means that the spiritual growth in my life comes when I acknowledge, confess and work through my responsibility rather than remain stuck in blaming. Forgiveness opens my heart, liberates me to be a real human being rather than a hypocritical, pretentious or judgemental person.

When I experience love as forgiveness in my heart, I am open to love others through forgiveness too, whether they recognize their need for it or not. I just don't have energy to judge, resent, hate, blame, shame or tear down those with different moral views than I have. My energy is for love because that's what gives me joy and meaning.

Any morality that is genuine must arise out of an experience that God is love. This experience then becomes a conviction, a conviction that God's love embraces me as an imperfect human being who needs continuing forgiveness. My need for forgiveness doesn't burden me or put me down. It liberates me to love even as I am loved.

3) And this brings me to my third and final point. Our gospel reading is an astonishing account of healing through the power of God's love in Jesus. But we would be totally missing the deeper dimensions of healing if we focussed only on the physical manifestations. Too many people want Christianity to give them some tangible, visible advantage over others, some benefit that would make the investment worth it. People want success, prosperity and healing focussed on their physical ailments. But what does Jesus offer? Is it just fixing bodies or changing whole persons in how they see and live life?

Healing and transformation are first and foremost a spiritual reality. There is inner transformation, not just outer manifestation, and sometimes, the inner transformation is even more astonishing. Jairus is a father, but he is also a leader of a synagogue. That means he is also a leader of his people. The leaders are against Jesus. Jesus is a peasant nobody who has set himself up as a teacher of God. And worse, he is drawing people to himself and teaching them a different vision, a vision where he is the very voice of God. If people keep listening to Jesus, and worse, believe in him, Jairus and his friends will lose their power over the people.

And yet, Jairus is also a father, a father who loves his daughter. And it is this love that wins the upper hand. Past his mistrust and animosity toward Jesus, past his pride, his love makes him vulnerable and open. He comes to Jesus on his knees, begging him publicly for help and healing. Can you imagine this scene? What will people think? You don't go for help publicly to someone you're trying to discredit. How self-defeating! How humiliating!

And yet, what happens? True love that is incarnated in Jesus does not take advantage of the humiliation and pain. There is no power move. Rather, genuine love responds to genuine love. Jesus' compassion responds to need, even of the person in need is an enemy. Tender sensitivity responds to vulnerable openness. That's how love works. Jesus will heal Jairus' daughter, no questions asked. Love is all that's needed.

Jairus has to change inside to come to Jesus and trust in Jesus. He is on a journey of healing and inner transformation himself even as his daughter is healed of her physical condition. In his search for some visible healing for his daughter, Jairus has to open up his heart and be changed by love. Humility and gratitude in Jairus are movements of love just like forgiveness is.

And what about the woman? In her case, she has been imprisoned by an illness for a long time. In Jewish religious circles, a woman hemorrhaging means that she is unclean. Blood being spilled represents life ebbing away. That is unclean. Being unclean also means she is isolated because people stay away from her so that they don't become contaminated themselves by contact. And so, she is not only suffering physically; she is also suffering social isolation and loneliness.

The woman is healed of her physical illness. But in order for that to happen, something much more substantial has to happen inside her. She is empowered to come to Jesus. She visualizes her own healing and acts on it in faith. She takes the initiative boldly and she even confesses publicly what she has done. That takes a huge amount of courage. Her healing is about spiritual empowerment. It is also about her reintegration into society. She doesn't have to stay imprisoned in a bad situation. There is hope. She can be changed by her actions and God's healing love to her through Jesus. If she never had this inner transformation happening within her, her illness would have imprisoned her till her dying day. The fact that Jesus acknowledges, affirms and blesses her publicly only further empowers her to live her life in a new way from now on. Awesome! Amazing! This is what makes a Christian - an experience of God's empowering and resurrecting love!

So then, even though people can get so caught up in their moral views, their judgements, blame and putdowns... caught up in their desire to be better than their neighbours... and even though they can call this Christianity... true faith is all about experiencing God's love, love that is steadfast in the face of our failures and imperfections... love that is steadfast in the face of our pain, hurt and suffering... love that is steadfast in forgiving and transforming human hearts. Love is open to others. Love builds bridges even where there is no moral agreement. Love can confront others but without putting them down. Love recognizes in humility that truth is bigger than our personal views alone. God's love is about being empowered, but not empowered to be better than others, but empowered to love others as we experience such love ourselves.

Have you experienced that God is love in a personal way in your life? Has such love become new for you again and again as you've face things and lived things?

Amen.