

WHAT MAKES A REAL CHRISTIAN?

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

A few years ago, several newspapers ran an article by Michael Coren. Coren had been a well-known columnist, author, public speaker, radio host and television talk show host. He was also a religious person. For the longest time he was known as a very conservative Christian with some strong moral views. He was also a spokesperson for the conservative Christian right. But something happened to Coren. He changed his mind on same-sex marriage. And once that door opened in his heart, he felt open to a lot of other things that were totally upsetting to more traditional, conservative Christians.

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 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 from people who called themselves Christians and one-time friends. He saw the fear behind such vicious reactivity. He knew he was called to forgive. But he was having a hard time forgiving what he called the: "Church of the Nasty."

Why I mention Michael Coren, however, is not for his views and how they had changed. No. Rather, his situation raises a deeper question for us all. The question is this: What makes a Christian? Is Christianity primarily about our moral views and values? Is it about what we believe? Or, is Christianity much more about an experience and how such experience shapes how we live?

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

1) First of all, It's all about 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, through nature, through various circumstances and situations that activate my spiritual openness and passion. But however it happens and however often it happens, to be a Christian is to experience that beyond the chaos, hate, indifference and selfishness in this world, God's love is the deepest current, foundation and goal of 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 the author 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 must be experienced “new every morning.” New life situations, new challenges, new relationships, new social realities... they require fresh experiences and deeper experiences of the love of God. However we feel that love – from deep in our hearts, through other people or circumstances, through worship, meditation, prayer or community, the love of God has to be the beginning and end of all that makes us Christian.

People who are judgemental, people who live and react out of fear; such people are disconnected from the love of God. They may claim they are defending moral principles and values. They may claim they are defending God’s will. But if they are not inspired by the love of God, new every morning, new after a time of waiting and seeking... 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 genuine Christianity.

2) And this brings me to the second point, and to Psalm 130. Sometimes, waiting for God and an experience of God’s love can take a 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, more than those who watch for the morning.” And sometimes, our waiting is more like a crying to God from deep places of pain and struggle in us: “out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord.”

And sometimes, the pain, the hurt, the stress 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. We are responsible for something, somewhere, no? We can blame God. We can blame others. We can blame the system. 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 direction, 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 and are living through?

The Psalmist does not stay in a state of crying out of the depths or waiting for the morning when something better will come. He also appeals to the forgiveness of God. He welcomes it and trusts it. The steadfast love of the Lord has to meet him as forgiveness. Forgiveness is what opens spiritual doors and relationship doors.

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

Finally, when I experience love as forgiveness in my heart, I am open to love others through forgiveness, whether they recognize their need for it or not. I just don't have the same energy to judge, resent, hate, blame, shame and 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 only 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 forgiveness constantly. And this doesn't burden me or put me down. It liberates me to love even as I am loved beyond anything I have done.

3) And this brings me to my third and last 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 external, physical manifestations. Too many people want Christianity to give them an advantage over others in the world, some tangible benefit that would make the investment worth it. People want success, prosperity and healing for their physical ailments. But what does Jesus offer people in this account? How is healing and transformation manifested?

Healing and transformation are first and foremost a spiritual reality. Only when people are experiencing inner transformation is there outer manifestation. 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 status and power.

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 would people think? What humiliation! What a come down!

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. Compassion responds to humility and gratitude. 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 must be changed inside for him to come to Jesus and trust in Jesus. He is on a journey of healing and inner transformation even as his daughter is healed of her physical condition. In his search for some visible healing for his daughter, Jairus has had to open up his heart and be changed by love.

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 loss of life. That is unclean. Being unclean also means she is isolated because people stay away from her so that they don't become contaminated. And so, she is not only suffering her physical condition. 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 and visualize her own healing through her own act of faith. She takes the initiative and confesses what she has done publicly. Her healing is about spiritual empowerment. It is about the recovery of her dignity. It is also about her reintegration into society. She doesn't have to stay imprisoned in a bad situation. There is hope for change. God's love in Jesus can work miracles. 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! Astonishing! 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 gain

some spiritual advantage, and even though they can call this Christianity, true faith is all about experiencing God's love. God's love is steadfast in the face of our failures and imperfections. Such love is steadfast in the face of our hurt and suffering. Such love is steadfast in forgiving and transforming human hearts. Such love is open to others. It 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 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 the love inside, healing and transforming us from within...

In this time of pandemic: a pandemic of physical illness, a pandemic of racial, sexual and gender injustice, a pandemic of fear and isolation, boredom and loss of meaning... May we experience God's love in a new way. May we be given the grace of learning how to wait with an open spirit, a forgiving and forgiven spirit. And may we recognize the inner transformation we need to move further into so that outer transformation is manifested by how we engage the world out of an inner fountain of love pouring out of our hearts; Amen.