



THE MISSION OF SAINT MARY MAGDALENE

Father Alan's Blog for the Sunday Next Before Easter "Palm Sunday" - April 10, 2022

"Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

St. Matthew 22:37-40 (KJV)

St. Irenaeus, one of the earliest of the early Church Fathers, was born (c. 130 AD) of Greek (or "*Gentile*") parents in Smyrna, Asia Minor (what is now Turkey) and died in Lugdunum in the Roman province of Gaul (what is now Lyons, France) as its bishop (c. 203 AD). A leading Christian theologian of the 2nd century, St. Irenaeus, through his writings, advanced: the development of the creed; as well as an authoritative canon of the Holy Scriptures; plus the authority of the episcopal (that is the bishop's) office.

A few crucial biographical points of St. Irenaeus' life can be gleaned from his own written works. For example, as a child in Smyrna, he heard and saw St. Polycarp, who was, at the time, the city's bishop. (St. Polycarp died a martyr's death in 155 AD, when he was burned at the stake by the Romans, rather than deny his Lord Jesus Christ.) In any event, according to Church tradition, St. Polycarp was the last known living connection with Jesus' Apostles, for as a youth living in Ephesus, he was purported to have been a disciple of St. John the Apostle, who was also living in Ephesus at the time.

Consequently, there were only three generations from Jesus of Nazareth to St. Irenaeus of Lugdunum.

According to Eusebius of Caesarea (a 4th century church historian), St. Irenaeus, prior to being consecrated as bishop of Lugdunum in 177 AD, had served as a missionary to southern Gaul, and as a peacemaker among the churches of Asia Minor that had been disturbed by heresy, most notably “Gnosticism”. Perhaps the most dangerous heresy to threaten the early church during its first three centuries, Gnosticism is based on two false premises.

- ☞ **First, Gnosticism embraced a “dualism” regarding spirit and matter. Gnostics assert that matter is inherently evil and spirit is good. As a result of this principle, Gnostics believed that anything done in the body – even the vilest sin – had no meaning, because “real life” existed in the spirit realm only.**
- ☞ **Second, Gnostics claimed to possess an elevated knowledge, a “higher truth,” known only to a certain few. (“Gnosticism” comes from the Ancient Greek word “gnosis” which means “to know”; hence, Gnostics professed to have a “higher knowledge” – not from Holy Scripture, mind you – but one acquired on some mystical, higher plane of existence.) Thus, Gnostics saw themselves as a privileged class, elevated above everybody else by their higher, deeper knowledge of God.**

Accordingly, almost all of St. Irenaeus’ theological writings were directed against Gnosticism, the most famous being a five-volume treatise written in Greek (c. 180 AD) entitled, “Against the Heresies: On the Detection and Overthrow of the So-Called Gnosis” (or “Adversus haereses”) and from which the following reading called, “The Covenant of the Lord” is excerpted:

“In Deuteronomy Moses says to the people, ‘The Lord your God made a covenant with you in Horeb, not with your fathers did the Lord make this covenant but with you.’

“Why did the Lord not make the covenant with your fathers? Because ‘The law is not laid down for the just.’ Your fathers lived just lives because they had the meaning of the decalogue implanted in their hearts and minds – that is, they loved God, who made them, and they did their neighbour no injury. So they did not need to be warned by written prohibitions; for they had the righteousness of the law in their hearts.

“When, however, in Egypt this righteousness and this love towards God were forgotten and became extinct, God was compelled by his deep love towards men to reveal himself by a voice. With power he led his people out of Egypt, so that man again might become the disciple of God and follow him. So that they might not despise their creator, he punished those who were disobedient.

“He taught them to love God, and instilled in them that righteousness which is towards their neighbour. In this way, they might be neither unjust nor unworthy of God. By the Decalogue he instructed men to be friends with himself and in harmony with their neighbour...

“Man did not have the glory of God. The only way that man could receive this glory was by obeying God. Therefore Moses said, ‘Choose life that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God and obeying his voice and cleaving to him; for that means life to you and length of days.’

“To prepare man for this life, God himself spoke the words of the Decalogue, to all men alike. And so these words remain with us too. By his coming in the flesh God did not abrogate them; he extended and augmented them. As for the precepts which enslaved, however, God imposed these on his people separately through Moses. These precepts were well devised to instruct or punish them, as Moses himself said, ‘The Lord commanded me, at that same time, to teach you statutes and ordinances.’

“But by the new covenant of liberty God cancelled those provisions which he had given to his people to enslave them and serve the

purpose of a sign. At the same time the laws, which are natural and appropriate to free men and applicable to all without distinction, were amplified and widened. Out of the abundance of his love, without grudging, God adopted men as his sons, and granted that they might know God as Father and love him with all their heart, and follow his Word without turning aside."

In case you missed it, please take note (because it bears repeating):

"By his coming in the flesh God did not abrogate (His Laws); he extended and augmented them."

And make no mistake about it – St. Irenaeus' message is just as relevant today. Because God has adopted us as His children, He has granted that we might know Him as Father, by loving Him with all our heart and by **"follow(ing) His Word without turning aside"**, echoing what the "Beloved Apostle" (who, incidentally, was still full of wonder **fifty years after the fact**) declared in St. John 1:14:

"... the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth..."

in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, The Christ, God's Messiah – the same Jesus Who, during His earthly ministry, condensed all of God's Commandments from ten down to two:

- 1. Love God; and**
- 2. Love neighbour.**



Five Sundays ago, I said that throughout Lent we would primarily concern ourselves with the first act of repentance, as stated on pages 90-92 of the Book of Common Prayer (BCP) in the second of two Exhortations, that being:

“...to examine your lives and conversations by the rule of God’s commandments; and whereinsoever ye shall perceive yourselves to have offended, either by will, word, or deed, there to confess yourselves to Almighty God, with full purpose of amendment of life. And if ye shall perceive your offences to have been against your neighbours, then ye shall reconcile yourselves to them, being ready to make restitution.”

Furthermore, to aid us in this most humbling Lenten effort – that is, “to examine our lives and conversations by the rule of God’s Commandments” – we used as our divine lens “The Decalogue” or “The Ten Commandments” (as found in Exodus 20:1-17). As mentioned in my message for the Second Sunday in Lent four weeks ago, God, in delivering the law to Moses on Mt. Sinai, gave him Ten Commandments engraved upon two stone tablets. Four of these Commandments (those etched on the first tablet) pertained to our love of God and the remaining six Commandments (those inscribed on the second tablet) pertained to our love of neighbour. Thus, as Jesus fittingly directed (St. Matthew 22:37-40):

“Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”



In short, therefore, the entirety of God’s Law is founded on the two precepts of loving God and loving neighbour. And yet, I need to ask: **have we, as Christians, truly been about the business of loving God and loving neighbour?** I mean, in the 1,850 years since St. Irenaeus emphasized, “*by his coming in the flesh God did not abrogate (His Laws); he extended and augmented them*” have we been “*follow(ing) His Word without turning aside*”?

More to the point: in the 2,000 years since our Lord Jesus Christ walked this earth, have we, as His disciples, really cottoned on to the fact that in order to fully love the Creator we need to love completely His creation?

- ☞ **Especially our neighbour?**
- ☞ **That is, every other human being?**
- ☞ **Every man, woman, and child, each one created in God's Holy image?**

Somehow (and most unfortunately) I think not. Because during this Lenten season, I was compelled to read – and then reread (for the umpteenth time) – Charles M. Sheldon's 1897 book, "In His Steps." And I realized, much to my shame, just how short of the mark most Christians (those called to be followers, or disciples, of Jesus Christ) have fallen since "The Word first dwelt among us" – particularly, in the 120+ years since Charles Sheldon's most-telling book was first published and which so movingly climaxes with these most compelling words, found on pages 262-264, as part of a sermon delivered by the book's main character, The Rev. Dr. Henry Maxwell:

"What is the test of Christian discipleship? Is it not the same as in Christ's own lifetime? Have our surroundings modified or changed the test? If Jesus were here today, would He not call some of the members of this very church to do just what He commanded the rich young man, and ask them to give up their wealth and literally follow Him? I believe He would do that if He felt certain that any church member thought more of his possessions than of his Savior. The test would be the same today as then.

"I believe Jesus would demand as close a following, as great a denial of self, as when He lived in person on the earth and said, 'Except a man renounceth all that he hath, he cannot be my disciple,' That is, unless a man is willing to do that for Jesus's sake, he cannot be Jesus's disciple.

“What would happen if in this city every church member should begin to do as Jesus would do? It staggers our minds to imagine the results! We all know that certain things would be impossible that are now practiced by church members. What would Jesus do in the matter of wealth? How would He spend it? How would Jesus be governed in the making of money? Would He take rentals from saloons? From tenement property?

“What would Jesus do about the great army of unemployed who tramp the streets and curse the church, or are indifferent to it, lost in the bitter struggle for the bread that tastes bitter when it is earned on account of the desperate conflict to get it? Would He say it was none of His business?

“Does the Church do its duty in following Jesus when it gives so little money to establish missions or relieve extreme cases of want? Is it any sacrifice for a man who is worth ten million dollars simply to give ten thousand dollars for some benevolent work? Is he not giving something that costs him practically nothing so far as any personal pain or suffering goes? Is it true that the Christian disciples today in most of our churches are living soft, selfish lives, very far from any sacrifice that can be called sacrifice? What would Jesus do?

“It is the personal element that Christian discipleship needs to emphasize. ‘The gift without the giver is bare.’ The call of this age is a call for a new discipleship, a new following of Jesus, more like the early, simple, apostolic Christianity when the disciples left all and literally followed the Master. Nothing but a discipleship of this kind can face the destructive selfishness of the age, with any hope of overcoming it. Then it would be possible to sing with the exact truth

*‘Jesus, I my cross have taken,
All to leave and follow thee.’*

“If we can sing that truly, then we may claim discipleship. But if our definition of being a Christian is simply to enjoy the privileges of worship, be generous at no expense to ourselves, have a good, easy

time surrounded by pleasant friends and by comfortable things, live respectably, and at the same time avoid the world's great stress of sin and trouble because it is too painful – if this is our definition of Christianity; then surely we are a long way from following the steps of Him who trod the way with tears of anguish for a lost humanity; who sweat, as it were, great drops of blood; who cried out on the upreared cross; 'My God! My God! Why hast thou forsaken me!'"



Therefore, this “Sunday Next Before Easter”, this “Palm Sunday”, as we reflect on our Lord’s triumphal entry into Jerusalem, humbly riding upon a donkey’s colt (as foretold 500 years before by the prophet Zechariah, in 9:9 of the Old Testament book that bears his name), let us remember how Jesus – the “Son of David”, the “King of the Jews” – did not turn out to be the king that the people expected, a “Warrior King” to drive out the hated Roman oppressors. Instead, by His Divine grace and preference, Jesus was the “King of Love” for both God His Father and for His neighbour: A King crowned not with a gem-encrusted diadem but, rather, with plaited thorns and with suffering; and a King Who reigned not from a golden throne but, rather, stapled to a rough, wooden, Roman Cross. For as He Himself taught us (St. Matthew 20:28):

“... the Son of Man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

Accordingly, today, let us strive to follow the example of our Lord Jesus Christ’s great humility. For only by humbly obeying all of God’s Commandments to us, only by “follow(ing) His Word without turning aside,” will our selfish pride be cast out, our sinful desires controlled, and our eternal souls subjected to God’s Holy will, fully preparing us to do His most gracious work in this earthly life on behalf of all others who we are so blessed to meet.



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