

4th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 6). About authority and being a thinking Christian
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“It’s a real tragedy that our faith has been so heavily influenced by the negative relationships that two great Christian figures had with their mothers”! That was something that jumped out at me in a conversation with other clergy I had recently. The two figures? St. Augustine of Hippo (not our St. Augustine!) And Martin Luther.

I suppose it’s another way of saying that Christian history formed as the result of a series of choices made or forced.

The choice to follow the thread represented by Irenaeus and Tertullian in the 3rd Century (who represented but one thread out of many in a very diverse Christian landscape) resulted in what, today, is often referred to as “orthodoxy” (small “o”) – what I suppose we would call “regular” or “normal” Christianity. Irenaeus proposed limiting Christian literature to certain books, leaving others out of what would become the Bible. Tertullian sought (successfully) to exclude women from ordained leadership.

Having achieved supremacy around the 4th Century this particular brand of Christian identity proceeded to demonize and expel other “Christianities”. So successful was this purge that it has only been in the last quarter century that knowledge of the other threads has crossed the scholarly-popular divide. What would our world have looked like, I wonder, if no one Christian thread became so dominant? Choices made; choices forced.

Had the approximately fourteen hundred Christian Bishops who followed Arius held the Christian center against the three hundred who met under Emperor Constantine’s auspices and chairmanship at Nicea in 325 C.E. our Christian world would have looked very different because the way we understand God and Jesus would have looked very different. Choices made; choices forced.

Had the 5th Century monk Pelagius’ view of human possibility won out over Augustine of Hippo’s view of a humanity steeped and wallowing in sin our world would likewise have been a quite different (and probably much happier) place. It is, again, only in recent memory that Pelagius’ theological questions about alienation and estrangement – so different from Augustine’s – have entered mainstream Christian conversation. Choices made; choices forced.

Likewise, had the Church chosen to follow 14th Century priest and philosopher William of Occam rather than Thomas Aquinas the Reformation might have happened sooner, more peacefully, and without the great divisions we still live with today. Choices made; choices forced.

Christian history has consistently been written by the winners, who have always claimed the blessing of God and the validation of the Holy Spirit – a self-fulfilling prophesy if ever there was one! What a shame that we humans want to live out of a metaphor of winners and losers. Had we chosen “the dance” then the two sides would have sought to work together in their different

“moves”. But, alas, human beings don’t do well with compromise and shared decision-making!

Certainly in the West, and also in other parts of our world, it has been possible until fairly recently for institutions to control what human beings believe simply by controlling the information flow. If the 12th Century Church said that unbaptized children went to hell when they died, mostly Christians believed it. If Galileo said the earth orbited the Sun the Church could make him recant AND tell the faithful not to listen because obviously (!) everything revolved around the earth (and for “the earth” we should read “the human ego”).

Scientific method has, interestingly, exerted a similar influence on the human psyche, with the exception of certain fundamentalist Christian groups still under the thrall of a medieval form of Christian Truth. If a scientist said that ulcers were not caused by a bacterial infection we believed them. We did this in spite of the evidence to the contrary. We now know that most ulcers ARE caused by a bacterial infection. Oops!

We now live, however, in a world that’s rapidly becoming a different place, where fewer and fewer people blindly accept what any institution or professional class says about truth and right, and Christians are no exception.

The change has been going on for some time – at least 500 years but it has rapidly accelerated in the last fifty years. Greater access to knowledge and the freedom to explore and interpret it have helped, of course, but the truth is that the Internet has been the back-breaker for any individual, group or institution that tries to corner any of the “truths” in our world by making appeals to their own innate authority. I have a friend who told me that some of his parishioners fact-check his sermons *as he’s preaching!*

Where, I wonder, does that leave people like me?! Or any doctor you know? Being a professional isn’t what it used to be!

I say “Alleluia!” to that change. Don’t get me wrong – I’m not anti-intellectual, or unwilling to trust professionals or experts. But I do believe that because we all, now, have access to vast fields of knowledge we also have a responsibility to access them – to “trust but verify”, and not just accept what someone says because they are labeled “expert” or “professional”. The difference from even 50 years ago is, I think most helpfully reflected in this little aphorism: “Most people aren’t looking for a Sage on the stage, they’re looking for a guide on the side”.

Knowledge now belongs to us all. Understanding that, respecting it – and those who have expertise in particular areas it – but also taking responsibility for validating it is what we as human beings now must do.

This absolutely holds true when it comes to our faith. Anglicanism has always held in high esteem the importance of exploring questions rather than accepting pat answers, and we are not alone among the Protestant Churches in this regard. Certainly in the last 50 years there has been an explosion in the theological exploration of formerly “no-go” areas of our faith, such as the theology of the Trinity and some of the (to our view) harsher proclamations of biblical truth.

Part of my responsibility as a preacher is, I believe, to open up for conversation and deeper exploration exactly those “no-go” areas in our faith, and – because of my own background – especially those “no-go” areas in our scriptures.

From my perspective, the flip side is, however, that you all have some responsibility not simply for fact-checking what I say, but also for exposing yourselves to the widest possible sampling of Christian writing and speaking, to what is being said today about Christian identity, and especially about the contents of the bible.

Today’s reading from Paul’s Letter to the Galatians and the story of the Woman with the Alabaster Jar – probably Mary Magdalene – are both examples. Some biblical scholars are now viewing the Galatian letter as absolutely central to understanding Paul, claiming that rather than rejecting Jewish Law Paul is using code to reject the “Law” of Roman Imperialism – in a similar way to John of Patmos’ use of code in the Book of Revelation.

And a significant number of biblical scholars now see the role of Mary Magdalene as much more central and important than the Church claimed of her – as important, and perhaps more important, than St. Peter.

So I say to you today, wonder about Pelagius and Augustine of Hippo, reflect on the difference between original sin and original blessing; read, mark, learn, inwardly digest what is being written and said about our biblical heritage; be a thinking Christian, because that’s the future of the Church.