

The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost, 28 August 2011
Saint James Episcopal Church, Tigard OR
The Rev'd Raggs Ragan, Rector

This week's collect is one that always sets me thinking. The line that catches my attention is "increase in us true religion". It can be an alarming phrase as we recall all of the people who have been abused or even murdered in the name of 'true religion'. We know that we want no part of that. It does not seem good or godly at all.

The rest of the propers for the day provide some help, I think. First within the collect itself, the request for the increase of true religion is linked with goodness: "Nourish us with all goodness and bring forth in us the fruit of good works". So true religion, the religion which is a genuine connection to God and our own true selves, involves being fed by God, fed with goodness, and then benefitting the world with the good works that flow from that feeding.

In the wonderful Exodus story, we found Moses and the Burning Bush. If we take Moses as an exemplar of true religion, and this as one of his primary religious experiences, we find that true religion involves stepping aside from ordinary life, taking time to notice what is remarkable (like the burning bush). It involves listening to the voice calling to us – even when it says things we do not want to hear (such as "Go back to Egypt, where you are a wanted man. Speak to Pharaoh and demand the release of the slaves.") It involves recognizing the I AM at the heart of all things.

The Psalm added useful perspective to our exploration of what 'true religion' might be. It is characterized by giving thanks and praise to God, and telling other people about our experience of God.

But it is in the epistle, it seems to me, that we have a beautiful summary of true religion. Paul gives a whole list of ways to live – presents true religion as a matter of how we regard the world and how we treat everyone. He lists genuine love, hatred of evil, persistence in good, honoring and loving one another, zeal, ardent spirits, service to God and the needy, patience in suffering, perseverance in prayer, hospitality to strangers, blessings for persecutors, compassion for all, harmonious living, and finally two admonitions that draw it all together: "so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all" and "do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." That is an inspiring passage, worthy of daily meditation.

Finally in the Gospel we find Jesus' challenge to take up our own crosses and follow him. That alone is worthy of extensive thought. What is my cross? It is appropriate that there has been and continues to be endless discussion about just what this means.

It is certainly personal. My cross is mine alone, however much it may resemble someone else's. But one way to consider this idea, in the context of our consideration of 'true religion' struck me this week.

The cross is an instrument of torture and death. It does suggest suffering and a surrender of personal power and freedom. But it is also a particular shape.

A cross is made of two pieces, one horizontal and one vertical. So each of our crosses has a horizontal piece and a vertical piece. If following Jesus on the Way of the Cross is our path to true religion, then that path must include a horizontal piece, having to do with other people, with the world around us, as well as a vertical piece connecting us to the divine.

Taking up our crosses then is all about full connectedness. When Moses turned aside to see the burning bush, he was opening himself to the world around him and found his cross – in the vertical connection with God, the great I AM, and in the horizontal connection with the people of Israel. And this cross, this true religion, certainly brought suffering to Moses, but also great joy and fulfillment.

Similarly Paul's list has much to say about loving connections with everyone, friend and foe alike, about our horizontal beam embracing all. But he does not neglect the vertical beam in prayer and hope. They are inseparable.

So when Jesus says that those who want to become his followers must "deny themselves, and take up their cross and follow him", one way to understand it, is to hear him saying that we need to let go of our tendency to pull into ourselves in self protection and self concern, and open outward, reaching out to embrace all the world in our loving care, and reaching up to connect with the loving God who created us all.

True religion then is standing as tall as ever we can bridging earth and heaven, with arms stretched as wide as ever we can to care for any and all in need. It is living in openness to the love of God and the beauty and suffering which surround us. This openness is the way of Christ, the way of crucifixion and resurrection.

One way to live into this way of understanding ‘true religion’ and ‘the way of the cross’ is to incorporate it into your prayer practice. Many people like to engage in ‘body prayer’, where movement and posture are part of the whole prayer experience.

Obviously we can pray entirely in our heart and mind, but what we do with our bodies always affects what we think and feel.

The practice of kneeling to pray expresses our humility. Standing to pray expresses our confidence and liberation as the community of the resurrection. Folding our hands expresses sometimes submission and sometimes entreaty. There are many such bodily expressions of our relationship with God in prayer.

So, when thinking of this understanding of living into the Way of the Cross, consider starting curled in on yourself, acknowledging our native way of focusing on ourselves, and then gradually straighten your back and lift your head, reaching up to God, with your arms still crossed on your chest, and then gradually spread them out as far as they will go, until you are a living cross, connected to the earth, connected to God, embracing all creation.

You will notice that you cannot stand like that for terribly long. Your circulation will suffer; your arms get weak. We each need our own Aaron and Hur, as Moses did, to hold our arms up. So the practice will help you remember our connectedness as a community. I can be open to the whole world, but I cannot embrace it on my own. To live truly cruciform lives we need one another for support.

Think of a favorite saint, whether one well known like Mother Teresa or Saint Francis, or someone personally known to you who has inspired you by their life. See if you do not find their lives to be truly cruciform, lived in the shape of the cross, connected to God and embracing the world.

Gracious and loving God, bless us with wisdom and understanding that we may truly find the way of the cross to be the way of life and truth. Amen.