

A Living Stone

5 Easter, Year A, 5/7/23

For all that it sounds to us as archaic, the King James / Authorized translation of the Bible has a power in the way it puts things that neither the original nor more recent translations can match. The beginning of today's gospel is a good example:

^{14:1} Let not your hearts be troubled; ye believe in God, believe also in me.

² In my father's house are many mansions. If it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you.

³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself, that where I am, there may ye be also.

⁴ And whither I go ye know, and the way ye know.

To know to open with having “believe in” turn into “believe also in,” to rhyme “go” with “know,” and then to contrast “way” with “know,” is to know a lot about how sound echoes sense, and how tone creates mood. The tone is kind, but with authority; the mood is peace, yet with clarity. Thomas and Philip ask their questions, being in a safe place to do so, and their anxieties are put to rest. The peace of God is like that. It tells us what we need to know, and tells us in a way that makes us feel good about it. We are relieved that our questions have been answered, and don't feel embarrassed that we had to ask them, because we did not know. “Wither I go...the way ye know...I am the way.” How could we have known that? (We could not have known that.) He is the way, and yet he is going – that is, he goes and he remains, he is with us and yet he is not here. If you want to give people a Spirit that they cannot see but can well know, and a Spirit that knows them at least as well as they know themselves, this is how you do it.

Yes, the forty-some scholars and writers whom Good Queen Bess's brightest surviving churchmen, some bishops and many Puritans, convinced Jamie Six-and-One to gather to craft an English Bible that everyone could use – everyone who was loyal to the king, crown, and Church of England that is – knew what they were doing. They also knew a good thing when they saw it, and took from the range of prior translations of scripture into English such words and phrases as captured the sense of the original in sounds that made good English, and therefore had a chance to make good teaching and good preaching.

Btw.: there is no good preaching that is not good teaching, even if even the best preaching does not always make for the best teaching.

These scholars put, that is, into the AV much of what made the English Protestant's first complete Bible, the Geneva Translation of 1560, so effective: accuracy, clarity, piquancy, and precision of thought, expression, and image. They also – and this, the king demanded – left out such notes and explanations as might make a good Christian realize how much the Bible didn't like hierarchies, priests, or kings. The Geneva Bible had many such notes, but both monarch and subjects agreed that it were best for their new translation to let the words of God speak for themselves, that the people be led not into temptation, yet also delivered from evil.

Chief among the earlier translations they used were those of two people who worked hard to bring the word of God to English, and at considerable cost to themselves. These were John Wycliffe (d. 1386, declared heretic in 1415) and William Tyndale (d. [strang.] 1536). They share responsibility for the particular power of the beauty of the truth of John 14:4. Wycliffe's translation reads: "And whither I go, ye know, and ye know the way," which doubles down on the phrase "ye know" and then pours all the force of that knowledge on "the way". Tyndale turns that final phrase around

so that v.4 reads: “And whither I go, ye know, and the way ye know,” letting the assonance “go...know...know” leave the ear ringing with the power of what we know and the fact that we know. Know me – Jesus, that is – and you know the way. Know the way, know my ways, and you know my Father – and you know that you know.

Powerful stuff – truth, even – and, remember, these men were harried and even persecuted for wanting us to know it; one of them, Tyndale, was even executed for it. They were terrifying, brilliant, larger-than-life people, yet as human as the rest of us, flawed and not fearless, determined and even dogged in pursuit of what they knew was right, yet pulled perhaps equally towards both vanity and grace, fighting for their lives and the truths they could not betray, even if it cost them their lives. Their likes among us include those activists, journalists, and others who fight for freedom with pen or sword or both, who languish in the jails of Russia, Iran, and Guatemala, et al., are silenced or expelled from legislatures when a gerrymandered majority does not like what they have to say, or lie dead in Congo or Chiapas or the Amazon, et al., because a corporation, cartel, or tyrant did not like what they had to say in defense of innocent people and the lands and waters they live on. They are too many to name, and I regret that I have not time enough to name them anyway, yet none of them set out to suffer or die for a cause, or even for the cause, the only cause: that truth win out, that neither people nor their environments are exploited for profit, and that tyrants economic, hegemonic, or political fall when the people whom they tyrannize say so, that each of us might live free under our own vine and fig tree, with none to make us afraid.

Stephen, the church’s first martyr, died for much the same reason. Our 1st reading today told how he was stoned to death because of what he saw, what he said, and how the people to whom he spoke reacted to it. It doesn’t give us the whole speech,

which is a recitation of all the ways God tried to reach out to the people of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and all the ways those people resisted it, culminating in their having had Jesus put to death, though now he lives – the very stone the builders rejected having been made the head of the corner, as the Good Book says. For saying this, and for saying that he could see Christ as God’s right hand even as he stood before a host of men who could not and would not have wanted to even if they could, they stoned him to death, just outside the city, with Saul of Tarsus watching. “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit,” Stephen said as they did this – probably said it in Aramaic, but there we are – and then, “Lay not this sin to their charge,” becoming at once the church’s first martyr and its first witness to what loving and forgiving our enemies when the chips are down (pardon the pun) truly means.

One also notes the irony of hearing Psalm 31:15-16 just after that reading. Stephen, indeed, took refuge in the Lord, and commended into His hands his spirit, but the Lord did, as the psalm begs, rescue him from the hand of his enemies, nor from the stones in that hand.

As the saying goes, He didn’t promise us a rose garden, though he did make it clear we’d have to deal with thorns.

This all leads us to the spirit of 1st Peter 2, which we also heard this morning, and which gives us the title for this sermon. For some, but I posit no good, reason, the lectionary leaves out verse 1 of this chapter, which says (along with vs.2):

Wherefore, laying aside all malice, and all guile, and hypocrisies, and envies, and all evil speakings, ² as newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby....

And in so doing “taste...that the Lord is gracious,” stretching the metaphor to its apogee, but giving us as it does so a memorable image of what receiving the Lord as does a child looks like. It also reminds us that the evil that we do – malice, guile, hypocrisy, and so on – are learned behaviors, not innate. We are no more born evil than a stone is made or meant, by the powers of earth and stars, to kill. Yet evils we can do, and evil we can become, much as a stone can be used to kill just as readily as it can be used to build. It all depends on what the hands that hold them have the heart to do, and whether the heart within has the heart to let them do it.

1st Peter then turns to a new metaphor, that of “a living stone,” of what the Lord is to whom we come, and by and for whom we are to be “as lively [living] stones,” built up in a spiritual house, an holy priesthood” – a new temple, as it were, and a new way of being priests, “to offer up spiritual sacrifices” that God in Christ wants. No more lambs, doves, or gilt-horned bulls, but ways of living – with mercy instead of malice, grace in place of greed, sincerity where once was guile, and in all things meaning what we say, and meaning good by it – these are the sacrifices made by people who are stones of their own temple: living stones, who carry the weight and the presence and the promise of what they believe in and what they’re willing to do about it in the very person, always, wherever they go. If Peter is the rock on which the chief stone of the corner will build his church, we are the stones out of which he builds it up from there – living stones, solid and weighty, strong as granite or sharp as adamant. This metaphor gives a new sense to the thought in John 14:3 that he goes to prepare “a place” for us, as he says, “that where I am, ye may be also.”

‘Part of the ship, part of the crew’ as say those who crew the Flying Dutchman. ‘What God hath joined together, let no-one put asunder,’ as say those who lead the marriage service. ‘That we may be made one body with him,’ as say we, or I, in the Eucharistic prayer, praying also ‘that he may dwell in us, and we in him.’ And what part of that

body? Hear the phrasing of John Wycliffe again, giving us in his translation of Psalm 17:7 an image that does not appear in the Hebrew: “Keep thou me as the apple of thine eye...Cover thou me under the shadow of thy wings...”.

You know, if you think about it, and as Sir Isaac Newton might attest, an apple, particularly one falling and on one’s head landing, might very well be called a living stone. Who could’ve known, when this sermon began, that it would end up here? Yet so God wills. Amen.