

WATCH OUT FOR THE CONSECUTOR!

A few Saturdays ago, as Loree & I were on our evening walk, we stopped to chat with five small children who were playing in a tree house where our street butts into the ocean. When I invited them to come to Sunday school next morning, they were silent, looked puzzled. Then one hesitantly said, "We don't have school Sundays." The shock of hearing that made me think of the historians' old chestnut that we're never more than one generation from barbarism.

To that bleak story I must add a recent Gallup poll's conclusion that most of your neighbors, here in America, are unfamiliar with Christian ideas, 70% reject moral absolutes, & 32% do not believe the Bible to be true.

Ignorance, unbelief, & a third dismal factor: hatred of Christianity. A recent president of Emory U. said "If I say this is a Methodist school, not a ripple. But if I were to say this is a Christian school, all hell would break loose." The hatred pervades not only academics but also the media, Hollywood, even NPR & PBS--institutions continuing to pump life into the profoundly flawed atheisms of Marx, Darwin, & Freud.

If the gospel is true, as I believe, why is God so patient with this ignorance, unbelief, & hatred? My answer is that he's not patient, just frustrated. His power cannot cure ignorance: the cure is knowledge, which cannot be forced. His power cannot cure unbelief: the cure is faith, which comes not by fear but by trust. His power cannot cure hatred: the cure is love, a flower that cannot be coerced into blooming.

But he's not so frustrated as to be immobilized. Rather, he goes into action, & the **gospel** is the story of the action he goes into. In & as Jesus, God comes to cure our ignorance, to give the light of the knowledge of his glory on the face of Christ (2Cor.4.6). He comes to cure our unbelief, living what came to be seen by his disciples as the most astonishing, yet finally the most believable, life unto death unto life. And he comes to cure our hatred by taking upon himself, in holy love, the Cross, which hatred causes & which, in its long shadow, ends hatred.

God the holy Trinity--God the Father sending Jesus the Son, who sends the Holy Spirit--is God in action, Light in action, Love in action, Life in action for the life of believers & of the world.

1 In the introduction to this sermon, you must have felt the atmospheric shift from pessimism to optimism. The human condition, & the current fortunes of our Christian Faith, seemed to be bleak & dismal--until I said God "goes into action, and the gospel is the story of the action he goes into." The premise of this sermon, & of our Faith, is that God is the primary actor in the universe, in history, & even in our own lives: we are the secondary actors, indeed more **reactors** than actors. We live in the servants' quarters, downstairs: the primordial & perennial action is upstairs, the action of the holy Trinity & of the holy angels. But it's hard to think & live this way in a culture that has evicted the upstairs residents & occupied upstairs with servants who've forgotten they are servants & claim they are lords, the lords & masters of all that matters, & (it always comes to this) boasters that matter is all.

2 Matter is all, said those greedy money-grubbers Amos excoriated in our first Bible reading this morning (8.1-12); & in the second reading, our Lord blesses Sister Mary for turning away from the material concerns in which Sister Martha is enmeshed, & giving her attention to "the one thing needful," to listen for the word of God, & obey it. But of course if God does not speak, it's pointless to listen. And if God does not act, we can't act in consonance with his action, his will, his kingdom for which we pray every time we pray the Lord's Prayer.

3 Reading in a Jewish prayerbook recently, I hit upon--or rather was hit with--this startling sentence: God says, "When you are not my witnesses, I am not God" (GATES OF PRAYER, 668). What we don't witness to, talk about, does not for us, or for our hearers, exist: that's an existential fact that has nothing to do with existence (ie, what we don't witness to may or may not exist). God exists, but--as the Lord's Prayer's first line witnesses--we the believers are to make his existence known (in the Hebraism, to "hallow his name").

4 I put a personal question to you: do you notice it when God is not noticed where you'd expect him to be? If you watched the PBS/TV series on the birth of our Christian Faith, titled "From Jesus to Christ," did you notice that not one of the fifteen talking heads suggested that God might have been in action in Jesus and his movement? All the action was presumed to be human, as with the workers building the Tower of Babel (Gn.11.1-9, cured at Pentecost [Ac.2]). They could have learned from the 4th grader who, asked in Sunday school why water is used in baptism, said something like this: "From the time the water touches you, God watches you from then on forever." Powerful water! An eminent educator, beru~~ing~~^{ing} the God-absence in our public schools, said that when he was a child, he was triply watched--by his parents (the home), by his teachers (the school), & by God (the church). "To have no sense of being watched by God," he said, "is a serious deprivation & departure from reality." Stanley Crouch, the brilliant African-American essayist, tells how the black preachers of his youth impressed on him that God was watching him, for his good. Said they, "you've got to be by yourself, 'cause you've got to meet the Lord alone. And the Lord looks at you, alone" (BOOKS & CULTURE, May/June/98, 15).

5 Yes, God does more than watch us. He's in action toward us, pursuing us for our good. Paul discovered this: when he was pursuing Christians for their harm Jesus pursued & overtook him for his good. Jesus ran faster, knocked him down, & demanded to know "Why are you persecuting me?" (the conversion story told 3x in Ac.: 9,22,26). The consecutor persuaded the persecutor to become himself a consecutor, eagerly catching up with the God-unaware to announce that God is, that God was & is in action for human good, & that the gospel is the story of what this action costs God & what it can mean for us, sinners all--the good news to cure the bad news we've been & are. When in this world's jungle of uncaring you do a good deed, speak a kind word, you are being a consecutor for God, hallowing his name. When you invite someone to come to your church or the Tabernacle for worship, you are a consecutor of the good news (even though at the other end of your effort you may feel like a persecutor).

6 And please do not feel ignorant if you've never before heard the word "consecutor." As far as I know, nobody ever heard of it till this morning. (Remember, you heard it here for the first time.) I made it up, on the model of the word "persecutor," when in daily devotion recently I came upon this in 1Ti.1.13. Paul is telling his conversion story again. He says: Ego fui "pers~~ec~~^{ec}utor,...sed misericordiam Dei consecutus sum." In Latin, which Paul could speak, a "secutor" is a pursuer. Here Paul says, in effect, "While I was a PERsecutor to harm Christians, Jesus as CONsecutor overtook me to grace me with mercy, to forgive me & lead me through the gates of new life." (A technical note for those who wonder why I'd quote Paul in Latin rather than in Greek, the language of the NT as we have it: Each day I read the Greek text first, then--on the facing page--the Latin, the second most formative & influential Christian language. In the case of 1Ti.1.13, there's nothing remarkable in the Greek. In Greek, Paul simply says that when he was a persecutor, "Christ Jesus our Lord" [vs.12] "had mercy on me." The Vulgate, Jerome's 4th-c. Latin version, enriched the idea by punning on the stem "-secutor," pursuer. The pun caught my eye, then my mind, & that's how this sermon got started.)

7 Now in case you got off this sermon train some time back & lost the track, I'll say simply what the trip is about. It's about a special kind of knowing & doing. It's about knowing that God in Christ in the Spirit is, & is pursuing humanity for our own good & the good of the earth, & is inviting us to be co-pursuers, co-consecutors with him even--& this I add as our Lord Jesus did--even if the cost of this co-CONsecutorship rises to the level of PERsecution (Mt.5.10-12). To know & do this, to live this, is to enter into the joy of our Lord, being good news with & for his good news, the gospel. "Make me a captive, Lord, / and then I shall be free!" I end this sermon with the words Paul ends the persecutor/consecutor passage with: "Now to the king eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen."