

"You shall love your neighbour as yourself!" Mark 12:31

The Faces in the Crowd

As I reflect on Catholicism I realize that faces come to mind, not a system, not a monolithic structure, not a demonic institution. I remember people who were very, very nice.

To be sure, this is my own personal experience, but it is true nonetheless and I suspect it reflects the experience of many others. When my elder sister died, they were very kind to me. When I was an unmannerly and disobedient brat at school the Mother Superior attempted to discipline me and show me a better way. When my family arrived in a new and strange land (California) the nuns befriended us, fed us, connected us with others who could help us, invited us to a New Years Day dinner, and in the cosy confines of the convent introduced our family to the unsettling phenomenon of North American football. A Catholic family provided us with a house and more tokens of kindness than I could possibly relate.

Catholics have touched my life in ways that I shall never forget and always appreciate. That is why it is so sad to see them caught up in a system and in the grip of a religion that is so far from true Biblical Christianity. That is also why it is so sad when Protestants are strident and unkind in their efforts to win Catholics to Christ. "Let your speech be always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each one," said Paul (Colossians 4:6a). How often our apologetic has been "salty" in an unsanctified sense.

The Appeal of Love

I believe that my neighbour, the Catholic, needs Christian love. It was by their love that I recognized the true followers of Jesus Christ. I had long since left the Catholic Church and embraced secular, godless philosophy. Existentialism and nihilism, even at the age of seventeen, seemed to capture and articulate the pathos and meaninglessness of life.

Nonetheless, in a fashion true to the words of Paul in Romans 1:18 f, I was actually suppressing the truth in unrighteousness. I knew that there was a God. I had learned from the Catholic Church that He was a righteous God and a God who judges. And so, whilst professing in the daylight to subscribe to an atheistic position, in the night watches I fumbled with my beads and prayed the rosary in the hopes that what I had been told so many years ago was actually true - praying the rosary every night will save you. (I hoped that God would overlook the nights that I failed to say my "Hail Marys"!) It was at this point, in the midst of confused ignorance and wicked rebellion, that the love of Christian young people touched my life.

Gracious witness, deeds of kindness, genuine interest, guileless love - these virtues manifested by Christian young people were used of God to woo my soul to the Lord Jesus Christ! I had often leaned hard upon the kindness of others, but had never encountered the love of Jesus flowing through His people. It seemed otherworldly to me - and indeed such love is not natural. I think I saw Jesus Christ first in the faces of those young people. Whatever I say to my Catholic neighbour, I want it to be accompanied by deeds of kindness. When I raise the issues of authority (the Bible alone) and of salvation (by faith alone) I want them to have no doubt that I love them. When I speak the gospel to them I want my actions to speak just as loudly, telling them that they are loved of God and loved by His people.

I want them to see the Lord's face in mine.

The Appeal of Works

It was like coming home. It was an arduous journey ended. It was a sweet pillow upon which to rest your head. Indeed it was rest. By grace I had found rest. All those years there had been no rest, and now I had been found of Him and in Him had found rest. What blessed words: "Come to Me, and I will give you rest."

Now, to be sure, salvation by works has a tremendous appeal to the unbelieving mind. The Catholic system had a tremendous appeal to me. In fact, salvation by works has universal appeal. There is something of the Pharisee in all of us and too little of the publican (Luke 18:9-14). So many pay lip service to grace and then seek life by works. This is the way of the Pharisee and that way is alive and well in the Catholic church. But it had an appeal to me. It left my pride intact (I could, after all, earn salvation), my social life untouched (midnight mass is kind to your agenda), and my sinful tendencies unhindered (the confessional was always there to deal with consequent guilt). But of true rest there was nothing.

Works is a cruel taskmaster and the works treadmill leads to despair and disillusionment. It was then that those blessed words touched my ears: "Come to Me, and I will give you rest". Salvation was not to be based on the filthy rags of my own perceived righteousness. The righteousness of God in Jesus Christ was my only hope! Faith in God and in Jesus Christ was the only way! And then, as with Luther, it was as if paradise opened up! And indeed it had.

Yet even now, as a citizen of a heavenly kingdom, I recall the days when I knew by experience that there was no peace for the wicked, that there was no rest in the round of activities prescribed by Rome, that there was deep within a longing for a different, a better way.

What a privilege to point my Catholic neighbour in the direction of the One who is that Way.

The Loss of Awe

It had been a long while since I had been in any Catholic church.

The day of the funeral found our family seated within the hushed confines of the one near our home. While there was much that was distressing to the heart of a child of God, there was also something striking.

What was distressing was the sheer folly of it all. Certainty was expressed that the deceased was in heaven. The certainty was based on baptism, the good works he had done, his involvement in the Catholic Church, and the grace of God. At the end of the day the only thing that really mattered was that the way of salvation espoused and encouraged was not the way of Jesus. And we wept over that.

But what was striking was the ritual, the solemnity, the sobriety, the sense that we were in the presence of Someone wholly "other" than ourselves. It was striking because that sense is only a distant memory for most evangelicals, and many feel well rid of it. Many are rushing headlong to embrace a fun-filled, non-threatening, cheery and up-beat approach to worship.

God forbid that we should feel small and dirty. God forbid that He should come across as "no tame lion". God forbid that we should feel any fear and sense of humiliation. The awesome and majestic

Jesus before whom John fell down like a dead man has been ushered out of churches in favour of a deity with whom we can enjoy a fireside chat! So it was striking to sit in the Catholic Church. While it is true that some Catholic churches are adopting the evangelical prescription for success, in this particular parish there was still a sense of solemnity. I remembered the days when I sat in a similar building trying to work my way to heaven. I remembered the hush that came over us when we considered what it was we were about, and who it was we were approaching. God was awesome and exalted. We knew nothing of, "Father", but we knew, at least, that He was in heaven and that it behoved us to treat Him accordingly. I remembered that even in my ignorance I felt I was in the presence of The Holy One, and it made me long for days when evangelicals would flee from the Ringling Brothers approach to church and remember that we worship our "Father who is in heaven"!

I believe my Catholic neighbour is struck by the loss of awe in evangelical churches and is left unimpressed. Furthermore, some professing evangelicals are unimpressed as well and find themselves strangely attracted by Roman ritual. May God give us grace to honour Him and attract others by worship that is marked by reverence and rejoicing.

Let the words of Watts be sung and experienced:

"Before Jehovah's awful throne, ye nations bow with sacred joy!"