

Reflections for the Fifth Sunday of Easter

A few years ago I served on the ordination committee for a friend and local pastor in one of the congregational denominations. I found it to be a joyful process with much Christian fellowship and good will. At the end of the process, everyone agreed that the candidate would do well as a pastor and that he had a strong knowledge of the Bible. All good, and if he had a weakness as a candidate it was some difficulty in understanding how to put all the different pieces of the Bible together. The bishop expressed confidence in the future pastor's skills but he did comment on my friend's complete disinterest in church history. We agreed that the ordination should proceed and that the pastor would be encouraged to work with me to develop a stronger knowledge of Christian thought and history. He was ordained, served, and left the ministry without ever once asking to work with me.

The congregational pastor's lack of interest in Christian thought and history is hardly unique to him. It is often very hard to interest people in these academic-sounding topics. Yet one of the distinguishing features of Christianity as a religion is its emphasis on what was once called doctrine, and now is often called theology. In our culture, with its emphasis on action and practicality, this emphasis often plays poorly. To make matters worse, Lutherans often have an interest in historical theology, which is how doctrine or the teaching of the church developed over time. In our culture, the only thing less interesting than theology is the history of theology.

So why is this emphasis on systematic thought so important and how does it relate to today's lessons? Christianity places so much emphasis on theology, where other religions have comparatively little, because of the person of Jesus Christ. Christians make the unique claim that we meet God in the flesh-and-blood human being Jesus of Nazareth. Such a claim is unique - Jews, of course, deny it, and Muslims regard it as a terrible apostasy. But this claim then leads to a whole series of questions, some of which are philosophical sounding, such as questions about the Trinity, while others are highly practical, such as pastoral care for suffering Christians.

The church's reflections on human suffering are a source of comfort and consolation for us. These reflections are often informed by the claim that the crucified Jesus of Nazareth is the innocent Son of God. Over a long period of time these reflections led to an outputting of paintings and other artistic expressions that depict Jesus as the 'Man of Sorrows' who suffered unjustly.

Christianity claims, because of its reflections on the Man of Sorrows, that faithful people can be weak and suffer unjustly. Islam, in contrast, denies that faithful people will suffer unfairly or be persecuted, in part because it denies that the crucified Christ is the Son of God.



Man of Sorrows (c. 1485–95), by Geertgen tot Sint Jans.

Christian claims that we meet God in the flesh-and-blood human being Jesus of Nazareth reach a high point in this week's gospel reading from John 14. That is why I spent so much time on background reflections - to interest you in this reading from the fourth gospel, despite its abstract sounding tone.

As Jesus prepares to depart this life, he tries to comfort his followers. They will neither be abandoned nor forgotten and he will return for them, to bring them to God's heavenly dwelling.

14:2 In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? 14:3 And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.

These verses were a great source of comfort to Jesus' followers, as they are for us. Jesus promises that his followers will live with him in heaven with God. But Thomas, of course, wants to know how this is possible. It is quite a reasonable question. How can any mere man, or even a great prophet, find his way to God in heaven, let alone return for his followers? Jesus answers Thomas:

14:6 Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. 14:7 If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him."



**I am the Road, the Truth,
and the Life.**

Jesus' answer here, and other answers like it, have been pondered by the church for 2000 years. What does Jesus mean when he proclaims: "If you know me, you will know my Father also?" It is the thought and reflection of many faithful teachers of the faith on such passages that has produced what we call "theology." In short, we meet the will and essence of God in the man Jesus of Nazareth. Because we meet God in Jesus Christ, we know that he can and will do what he promises: to return for us so that we may live in God's heavenly dwelling.

So what is the purpose of Christian thought and reflection? Those who are interested and pursue it will benefit from a richer understanding of their faith that offers hope and comfort. A pastor should naturally encourage education and reflection, while recognizing that it is not for some people. One person, after I invited him to a course, replied, "Adult education is not my cup of tea." So the community tries many avenues for communicating the faith: classes, devotional readings, music, and art. Even the architecture of many churches is an expression of the faith. All are intended to communicate the wonder and power of the Word made flesh.

Speaking of artistic expression, one of the church's great hymns is, "How Great Thou Art." It is based on a 19th century Swedish poem and the tune of a Swedish folk song. This hymn rejoices in the beauty of nature and power of God. It is certainly appropriate for this Sunday. I always

enjoy it when we sing it in church. Susan has suggested a nice offering of it on YouTube: [How Great Thou Art](#).

Notes:

This week's lectionary lessons can be found at the [Vanderbilt Divinity School library](#).

They are:

Acts 7:55-60

Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16

1 Peter 2:2-10

John 14:1-14