

A Search for Faith

By Peter Mussen

Invocation:

"Blessed, praised and adored, be our Lord Jesus Christ - on his Throne of Glory in Heaven, in the most holy Sacrament of the Altar, and in the hearts of his faithful people. AMEN"*

GOOD MORNING! (GOOD MORNING CHOIR!)

Father Lorne graciously met with me to begin a discussion of faith shortly after New Year's and he invited me to preach one of the Homilies during the Lenten season. And so, I wish to share with you a bit about my circuitous journey through apprehension and doubt towards peace and faith and ask you to accept this story as my gift, insufficient as it seems to me.

Faith and metaphor seem to go hand-in-hand, don't they? The metaphor of the journey, path or pilgrimage is so widespread in the language of the Church that its use may seem trite at times. I would love to entitle my search for faith something catchy like The Way Less Travelled or Peter Mussen, How Long is Here for This Time? but to be honest, I think Lost in the Swamp would be closer to the truth.

Let me begin this reflection by noting that swamps do have redeeming features - you just need to dwell there long enough to find them.

God Announces his Existence to young Peter

I discovered the very real existence of God just shy of my fourth birthday one Sunday morning as I sat quietly ripping pages out of the Book of Common Prayer. I was in the front pew nearest the central altar at *St. Philips the Apostle* in Toronto. I imagine I was bored.

Our rector, Father David Clarke, had been droning on over the consecration of the sacraments in front of me when I suddenly became aware of someone in vestments leaning over me and whispering, "*Peter, if you don't stop that...I'll hit you with a baseball bat.*" Clearly, I had just been rebuked by God himself!

For many months after, it continued to be a source of confusion each

time we began the Lord's Prayer because everyone would say, "Our Father..." as I dutifully said, "*Our Father Clarke , who art up there...*". Thanks to David's gentle sense of humour, we finally got that one ironed out and my terror of his eternal wrath and my imminent damnation slowly abated.

Whether I wanted it or not, I was nurtured and grew in our St. Philip's faith community. With the likes of broadcasters, linguists, chemists, psychiatrists, a baseball-mad nun and scads of young people *as congregants of St. Philips*, the atmosphere was indeed stimulating. After 60 years, I think I understand why my parents wanted me anchored at St. Philips - it was one of *their diabolical plots* to develop faith and character in me. Perhaps Bill Cosby's remarks about the first time he tried to gas up his new car said it best; "pour it all over and hope it seeps in somewhere."

When I reached 20, I was invited to sit on the Advisory Board of St. Philips as representative for the servers and younger choir members. And, ominously, I began to read Bertrand Russell's angry complaint, Why I am Not a Christian around the same time. I sensed a neon sign going off in my head saying *Welcome to the Slough of Despond*.

Mired in this new seedbed of doubt, I continued to read criticisms of Christianity and its adherents both past and present. I ranged through books as diverse as Berton's The Comfortable Pew and Goulding's deeply troubling Lord of the Flies.

Fortunately, I balanced these negative portrayals with the likes of C. S. Lewis' Screwtape Letters, the writings of Herbert O'Driscoll and Jean Vanier. Just as influential were novels such as To Kill a Mocking Bird and Who Has Seen the Wind as well as the canon of human suffering and doubt found in great plays like Antigone and Becket. Probably one of the most profound and disturbing books to challenge my faith in God was Ellie Wiesenthal's, Night.

In the midst of settling further into doubt, I became very active in the parish life of St. Thomas', Owen Sound. Because of Father Reg Warner's unpredictable health, I was appointed lay assistant deluxe! I was an uncomfortable fixture, vested and 'tuned up', carrying out most of the duties appropriate to Tom Patterson's role here each Sunday. It bothered me that permission had been so

freely given from the Bishop for this to happen. He did not realize that the faith family of St. Thomas' were putting their trust in another Peter - AND just like the original, I was a chip off the hypocritical block...or that's how it felt to me.

Shortly after Reg retired I left active participation in St. Thomas'. I was tired, drained and very uncertain whether my intense involvement in the weekly worship of St. Thomas' had been a gift freely given or something much darker, something with the odour of guilt about it. For months at a time I did not attend. I felt vulnerable and I was resentful of the well-meaning parish expectations urging me to consider holy orders. What did they know?

A few years later, I slowly drew back to St. Toms, partly because a fine young priest, Father Paul Millward, had become our new rector. I found him to be imminently human, humble and at ease with himself and others. It only occurred to me later that perhaps Paul was in on my parents' plot, too. Was he just a coincidence or was something else going on? How did Paul find words of reassurance that truly meant something to me? And, just what was a refrigerator salesman and department store manager doing carrying on like a priest, anyway?

Paul and I found we had a common thread in our search for faith - a conviction that each person has within them their own unique place - some would characterize it as a sacred and spiritual setting - a setting that might be *of a tangible nature* like a quiet place you cherish or perhaps a metaphorical sanctuary that can change location as you do, but a definite place. The important characteristic is its uniqueness *relative to you and to you alone*, where reflection and introspection are possible. And just perhaps, a climate can develop in which the most intimate of conversations with God can begin and mature. It is not an esoteric Shangri La but it does have a living, breathing, reality for each of us. The recognition of this truth was as if I could hear God sigh. Finally, I felt some firm footing under me.

My quiet place is a point of rock on a tiny island jutting out into a bay in '*Rainbow Country*'** and it invites residence in the late afternoon when the warm summer sun bathes the far shore in rich tones of light and the afternoon northwesterlies stir the white pine, birch, oak and spruce. The chant of the wind makes me think of a choir quietly singing the Psalms of David.

It was there, reflecting, musing about what meaning God held in my life that it occurred to me; *my problem with faith was a product of confusion*. I was confusing faith in God with behaviour inspired by ABSOLUTISM.

I judged God by the reckless, arrogant and often mindless actions of some of his adherents, past and present. It became clear to me that I had somehow missed the real meaning of faith and failed to recognize the two genuine behaviours that always seem to inform it; sacrifice and courage. I had been distracted for years by the individual and group nonsense that selfishly masqueraded as FAITH. The *power struggles* and *willful ignorance throughout elements of the worldwide Church* had constantly distracted me; so had the aberrant behaviour of those who imagined they *and they alone* possessed ultimate security, absolute certitude and perfection of God's message. I was interpreting such power and absolutism as a fatal flaw of God. This left *my faith* in shambles - "the peace which passes all understanding?" Indeed.

Perhaps I have come to understand what C. S. Lewis was talking about when he mused about *two different kinds of faith*.

Lewis, discussing faith with members of his beloved Socratic Society, called them simply, Faith A and Faith B.

"Faith A" is what you and I probably experience most of the time. It demands proofs for God's existence and is distracted by miracles. It relies heavily on rational, logical argument and experience. Lewis says it is not necessarily negative because it prepares a person for religious experience where none may have occurred before. Maybe he means it is simply asking life's Big Questions and maybe we could change the label from 'Faith A' to Faith Past.

"Faith B", Lewis says, is a "*trust, or confidence, in the God whose existence is...[consented] to.*" It is an attitude like our confidence in a friend or in our spouse. It has helped me understand that before times of tragedy God does not sit at his celestial computer, as Gary Larson's Far Side Cartoon would have it, *and press the "smite" button*.

Permit me to add this thought: "Faith B" seems *forward looking*. It is not encumbered by factual detail. How could it be? Facts happen now or in the past. However, "Faith B" or as I like to think of it, Faith Forward, *accepts the gift of*

trust in Christ Jesus and in one another as a unique condition without any constraints.

My friend and one-time mentor, Dr. Jim Wilkes, developed the simple but truly beautiful idea of how sacrifice and courage operate together. I think he might have been reflecting upon Lewis' idea of "Faith B" in his book, The Gift of Courage. Dr. Wilkes challenges us to understand how sacrifice is not only a central act in our struggle to define our faith in God, but is ultimately an act of courage and therefore a true and living gift. Letting go of hatred, resentment or avaricious desire, admitting to fault or culpability, relinquishing power, admitting that NO one individual or group has the corner on certainty, security and perfection; these are sacrifices both great and small that set us free, renew our lives in Christ, and stand as a courageous gift to God and to all our sisters and brothers here and elsewhere.

Doubt and uncertainty have been my companions for much of the last 40 years but I am now finding my way Forward to GOD. I can see *and* grasp HIS path *in the impossibly beautiful and uplifting gifts of courage and sacrifice offered by* technicians in damaged Japanese nuclear plants, in the vigour of those who refuse to see their fellow human beings oppressed, in Haitians who still sing songs of praise, in the life of our young daughter who refused to die and in the lives of any of God's children who could have, *should have*, given up hope long ago but who still face each new morning with determination. Our separate spiritual journeys can ebb and flow together and allow us to nurture each other in the name of Christ Jesus. Ultimately, this trust, this *Faith Forward* gives us a great filter to separate the distractions of doubt from real hope and trust - just as swamps, bogs and fens truly filter the water that gives us life.

AMEN.

Notes

* In loving and happy memory of one of the most important persons in my life, Canon David R. L. Clarke, Rector, Mentor and Friend, St. Philips the Apostle, Caribou

Rd., Toronto, ON. David used this invocation as he began his sermons. Recalled and kindly passed on to me by Mr. Larry Bagnall, Member of Parliament, The Yukon.

** "Rainbow Country" is the Ontario Government's designation for the area above Muskoka anchored by Parry Sound and covers the N. E. side of Georgian Bay and inland waterways up to The French River.

Books also considered but not mentioned in this Homily:

Berger, Peter. A Rumour of Angels, Penquin Press

O'Driscoll, Herbert. The Sacred Mirror - Meeting God in Scripture, Anglican Book Centre

Wilkes, Dr. James R. To Wrestle and To Dance, Viking Press

Jim is a semi-retired Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist and Anglican Theologian (Trinity College, U. of Toronto). I first met Jim in 1968 when the Wilkes joined us at St. Philips the Apostle. Jim and I "worked" communions together with Father Clark and Larry Bagnall. What a team!