

Montague Pastoral Charge

Jan. 28, 2024 – Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

1 Corinthians 8:1-13, Mark 1:21-28

Sermon: “Farm to Altar”

Timothy Wisnicki

In his brilliant novel *The Wake*, the English writer Paul Kingsnorth tells the first-person story of a proud Old English freeman at the time of the Norman invasion of Britain in 1066 A.D. When the Norman conquerors burn down his village and kill his family, the main character, Buccmaster, sets out on an adventure of vengeance. Having lost everything, he goes into the wild and lives off his bitterness, getting more and more unhinged in his hatred not just towards the Norman invaders, but against all the changes that have happened to his homeland, including its conversion to Christianity. He has no interest in this “Crist,” he is a man of the old Gods who were there before Christianity came along, the Gods of the forest and the fens, the gods of the springtime and harvest, whose power is the power of nature in its wild freedom, not in books and laws. At one point, as Buccmaster stands with his sword in his hand, ready to execute a Norman bishop, he proclaims:

“there is ways to see this world i saes. there is the way of the boc and the way of the wilde there is the god of the boc and the gods of the mere there is the way of the crist and the eald ways of this land. i is cum from the mere i specs for the wilde for the eald gods under the blaec waters in the drencec treows. i is the lands law ofer mens i is eorth not heofon leaf of treow not leaf of boc”

Well, I have to say, there’s something stirring in those words. Maybe I’ll get in trouble for saying this, but I think we should admit that there’s something beautiful about paganism. I should say: I’m using the word “paganism” in a technical way; paganism is the scholarly term that we use to refer to the non-Christian, non-Jewish religious traditions in the early history of the Church. It’s a catch-all term for people who didn’t believe in one god, but sacrificed to many gods, whether it was Apollo or Pan or Woden or Thor. I don’t believe in Pan or Thor, but I have to admit that there is something rugged and beautiful about those traditions.

A number of years ago I had the opportunity to visit Stonehenge. In truth, as I parked my car at the visitor’s centre and started on the long walk to the site, I was expecting to be let down. I thought to myself, “I’ve seen this a thousand times in pictures already, it’s going to be crawling with tourists, it’s not going to make any impression on me.” But when I got there and I felt the wind sweeping over Salisbury plain, and I looked at the stones silhouetted against the sky, and saw the barrow mounds looming over the horizon far off, where ancient pagans had buried their dead, I felt that I understood what Buccmaster was saying. This is primal, this is earthy, this is tangible; this is the way of the wild, not the way of the book. This is religion! Why can’t Church be this embodied, this elemental, this numinous?

From the way we have used the word to denigrate other beliefs, not least those of Indigenous peoples here in Canada, you would think that the word “pagan” means something nasty and offensive. But really, it comes from a Latin word *pagus* which means “country

district” or “village,” just like the word “heathen” comes from the word “heath.” The pagans and the heathens were the common country-folk, people who lived out on the heath, who had their local gods and local customs. And again, we have to admit that there’s something very attractive about that; paganism is a *contextual* faith, where the beliefs grow organically out of the people’s experience. The world in which Paul was preaching his Good News was an overwhelmingly pagan world in that sense. In our reading from 1 Corinthians we see the early Christians figuring out how to be faithful to the One God, revealed to them in Jesus, in a world that is overwhelmingly polytheistic and pagan. The question they asked Paul about is a painfully specific question that couldn’t possibly seem to have any relevance to us today: it’s the question of whether it’s OK for members of their little church in Corinth to go to the pagan temples and eat the meat that’s been sacrificed to other gods like Zeus or Artemis.

Even though we don’t have a copy of the letter they sent to Paul, you can almost hear them hoping that Paul’s answer will be “Yes, you can eat it.” Because going to a pagan temple was part of the fabric of city life; it would have been an affordable way to get meat, and it would have been an important place for social bonding – much the same way that a group of friends might meet at Tim Hortons for coffee. The Corinthian Christians *know* that these other gods aren’t real; there really is no such person as Zeus or Artemis, so does that mean that they can buy the cheap meat from the temple food court and eat there with their non-Christian friends and neighbours? Or would that make them complicit in idolatry?

We could talk about how Paul works through this tricky ethical question, but I find it more relevant just to notice how much the world has changed for these Corinthians. Their life and values have been turned upside down. Not long before, they were quite contentedly living in the pagan religious world, making sacrifices to the local gods and dining with their neighbours in the temple market. Now all that has been taken away: “No idol in the world really exists,” Paul says, and “There is no God but one.”

My concern is this: when these Corinthians make the switch from worshipping many gods to worshipping one, is it an opening up, a discovery, or is it a shrinking? Is it an expansion of their faith, or is it a reduction? Is it a cause for joy, as they discover the beautiful oneness of God, or is it a kind of disenchantment, as if the world has turned out to be less interesting than they thought. We tend to think of monotheism as glorious and liberating – and it absolutely is! – but would an ancient pagan be disappointed to have to believe in only one God? When they stop sacrificing to Apollo, does it mean that the world seems less enchanted, less alive, because it turns out Apollo doesn’t exist? Even if we can’t understand their predicament with the food, we can understand that feeling of disenchantment. It must be like going to a magic show and then being shown all the tricks, so that you can never again feel the wonder.

You probably know the song “Imagine” by John Lennon. It’s a beautiful song, but I’ve never been quite sure about it. It’s not just the line “Imagine no religion” that bothers me – in fact, I don’t mind that line at all. What I’m not so sure of is the sense of disenchantment you can get from the lyrics before that, if you’re not careful. “Imagine there’s no heaven; it’s easy if you try. No hell below us, above us only sky.” *Only* sky – what a problematic word that “only” is! Imagination shouldn’t be a reduction like that, imagination shouldn’t mean stripping things away until you’re left with an “only.” No, it should be a re-enchantment of the world with richer meaning and deeper magic.

The question is this, then: when Jesus clears away the demons or the false gods, does he just leave an empty space, an “only,” or does he give something fill that space? Is he just breaking the idols and disenchanting them, or is he re-enchanting them with something even better?

Broadly speaking, there are two opposite complaints that people have with the Church: I think of them as the *rationalist* complaint and the *romantic* complaint, and we should try to have an answer to both of them. The rationalist is the voice that says, “You churchy people believe too much. All these miracles and dogmas that can’t be tested scientifically, this is all nonsense.” To that voice, a text like our gospel reading from Mark is the most offensive. The rationalist says, “Give me a break! Jesus is casting out demons? Surely you don’t expect me to believe that! Who believes in demons anymore? That’s just believing what you know ain’t true.”

That’s the rationalist complaint; we’re very familiar with that one in a scientific age. But then there’s the opposite, the romantic complaint, which is like Buccmaster’s. It goes something like this: “It’s not that you believe too much, you believe too little. You Christians are so narrow-minded, you think everything can be contained in your dogmas. Your faith is all tidy and intellectual, it’s in your heads, not in your hearts and your bodies. Paul says that ‘Food will not bring us close to God,’ but are you sure about that? Have you tasted the barbecue outside the temple of Artemis, or sampled the wine of Bacchus? You follow the way of the book, but what about the way of the land? There is so much spiritual experience you’re missing out on. Could you Christians have built Stonehenge and stood in there to watch the summer solstice rise, the way the druids did? I don’t think so.”

The romantic complaint against Christianity is pretty searing, because it has a point. Christian faith has too often been just like that – all in the head, not in the heart, a set of beliefs without practices, a way of life that’s not grounded in the natural creation, as if what happens in this world doesn’t matter very much.

But it doesn’t need to be like that; it never should have been allowed to get like that, really. It should be a wild and romantic faith, a faith of the *pagus* and the heath, of the trees and the fens; it should bring together everything good from those pagan practices and tie it all together. Paul says that “for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.” *All things*, he says: all the good creation comes to us through Jesus Christ. Which means that through him we are meant to revere and enjoy all creation: the seas, the fens, the dark forests, with our whole selves. “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly,” Jesus said. Life should come to us through him like light through a prism; our faith should crack open the beam and display its rainbow of colours; it is meant to be an expansion, not a reduction. Christianity is meant to be every bit as elemental as those powerful pagan practices from long ago.

And in many places, it is. If you had gone to Ethiopia a couple of weeks ago, you would have been there for Timket, which is their celebration of the baptism of Jesus. It’s the most wonderful liturgy: they wear the most extravagantly coloured clothes, they parade around outside pretending they’re carrying the Ark of the Covenant, and then they all jump in the water and have a big swimming party. It’s exactly the sort of wild, embodied faith that would do us all some good. That’s what Christian faith is supposed to be.

As for the meat sacrificed to pagan gods, if food won't bring us close to God, as Paul said, it's not because eating has nothing to do with faith, it's because God has already come close to us – and come close to us in food, even! (Because what else is Communion than God coming close to us in bread and wine?). And if Christians couldn't have built Stonehenge and watched the midsummer sun peak through the stones, it's not because we don't celebrate the sun, it's because we've waited outside the tomb on Easter morning and seen something even more amazing: we've seen the stone rolled away and an even brighter sun rise over that garden. When you've seen that, something as magnificent as the longest day of the year is even more wonderful, *just because* it's a parable of that even deeper magic.

The more grumpy conservative Christians out there sometimes complain that we're living in a neo-pagan society these days. I know what they're getting at, but I don't think they're talking about the same pagans we are. I like what C.S. Lewis had to say about that; he thought it actually be a very good thing if it the world would be a little more Pagan, because all that passion and mythology might rekindle our imaginations, so that we might understand our own faith better. He says, "It is hard to have patience with those Jeremiahs, in Press or pulpit, who warn us that we are 'relapsing into Paganism'. It might be rather fun if we were. It would be pleasant to see some future Prime Minister trying to kill a large and lively milk-white bull in Westminster Hall."

In any case, Buccmaster is wrong: we don't need to choose between the way of the book and the way of the wild, or between the way of the Christ and the old ways of the land, or between heaven and earth, or between the leaf of the tree or the leaf of the page. If we understand the wildness of our faith properly (just think of the wildness of the man we read about today, who spend 40 days in the wild before strolling into town to cast out demons!) then those ways are all one way of faith – and a very exciting way it is.