

**7/4/2004**

**PENTECOST 5**

**Gal 6:1-10,14-18, Year C #9**

Every now and then, most of us awake in a night. When I do, I enter into prayer and eventually am roused by the alarm going off, only then realizing I fell back into sleep. Of course, sometimes this doesn't happen. And so, after nattering at God for a good while, I need to take a break from him, and I'm sure he wants one from me. So I get up and read, or flip on the T.V. to see what the world is like at 3am in the morning.

It would seem that the world at that hour is inhabited by motivational speakers, each selling a product which is going to put me on the path to good health or financial or emotional success: "Your life is drifting? You feel lower than a worm in a wagon rut? You're lame and don't got game? Then open my book, listen to my tape, punch up my CD, watch my video, and help is on the way."

I've noticed, however, another approach arising in the motivational shtick. No longer is it just a litany of bright moments, unswerving success, no defeats. Now I can hear about "How I learned from BIG mistakes" or "my darkest hour."

In other words, failure is chic. And as a Christian, I'm all for this approach. It speaks more to me: I've failed in so many areas of my life so many times. And yet I've survived. And not only survived, but, when I've sought to learn from my failures, I've actually thrived. The motivational speaking circuit seems to have caught up with what Christians have always known: we learn more from people's failures than from their successes. AND, we learn more from our own failures, which of course include our sins, than we do from our successes.

This day we have heard our apostolic father Paul say, "Far be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ." What an extraordinary statement: glorying in, reveling in, celebrating a thing which is the very sign of Paul's failure as a human being, and your failure and mine as well ... a thing which our Sin caused, produced and executed. And yet, the cross formed the core of Paul's motivational preaching, and remains the core of any proclamation which is true to the gospel of Christ.

Why? Well, by the gift of imagination with which God has graced us, step back this day with me before time and existence were, when there only was GOD.

There in eternity we find God forever enjoying the play within himself between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In the midst of their play, the Father conceives a gift for his Son, a Bride who would be privileged to share in their joyous communion with one another. The Father offered this idea to his Son, who rejoiced in its beauty and possibility, and said, "Yes!" to the offer.

At that moment, this thought in the mind of the Father, through its embrace by the Son, took form and energy and there came into being Creation: the invisible cosmos of angels and the visible cosmos of galaxies, stars, planets, water, air, fish, horses, tomatoes, pomegranates, trees. And, presiding over it all, was this unique creature, fashioned in its Creator's very image and likeness, ordained to be the one who would give voice to Creation's praise of her Groom and caress him with her love ... this creature who is you and me: humanity.

Now at the heart of this great act of God, there was a risk, a most necessary one. For the creature which we are to be able to love our Maker and Groom, we, like him, must have the capacity to choose, to choose for Him or against Him. After some moments of blissful communion with Him, we stopped and looked at ourselves. Impressed by our glory we took offense at our subordination to our Lover and decided we could do just as well without Him.

At that moment, God had a choice to make: obliterate this thought which had now turned itself against Him ... or allow it to remain in being. And as the Father considered he heard the pleas of his Son: "Father, forgive her; she doesn't know what she's done. Save her, out of love for me."

"But to save her", the Father replied, "she must face her error and know her perversity. For this to be possible, you will have to go to her in her own form and woo her back. And as she has been so perverse as to reject you, she may kill you and only by that act perhaps come to her senses and return to us. Are you willing to embrace that?" And the Son cried, "Yes!"

And so, following upon our Sin, we, and all Creation, continued in being. And eventually, in time, the Son did come to us, in our form. He injured us with the sweetness of his love. So we beat him, lashed to his back a heavy beam, prodded him outside our city to a garbage heap. Along the way he fell many times, each time struggling back up, propelled by love for us and drawn forward by the voice of his Father, calling, "Come to me. Finish the deed. They must see." And the Son did finish the deed, so that we might see.

How might we see? How better than through our failures, our sins, than through our successes. Our successes so easily we take to ourselves, shreds of evidence that we can make it on our own, that we can make heaven for ourselves. But our failures, our sins: they bring us to our knees, they slam us flat, they mock our arrogance, and they say, "Look, willful one. Heaven is far beyond you. Your grasp cannot reach it, nor your leap breach its divide. There only is one way.

"You must crawl upon that thin timber which now stretches over the divide, that cross upon which you hung your Lover. Now needled with the thorns of your sins, you yourself **will** bleed. But the blood you will lose is diseased; it must be gotten out of you. Risk the journey. Brave the loss of your own life.

"Look: hands are reaching out to you from the other side. See the holes within them, the rich red blood coursing beneath. They are your Lover's hands. He overcame even your perversity and wants you with him. Go to him. When finally you think you cannot go on and cannot make it, let go the cross, reach forward. His hands will catch you and from their wounds his rich blood will flow into yours, transfusing your body, transfiguring your soul, bringing you home, to heaven, at last."

You see, dear ones, when at that time so long ago, now lost to our conscious memory, we so perversely chose against God, God could have chosen other than he did. But the Son wanted us for himself. And so we continued. And the way for our return to the One who loves us beyond all telling, became a way not apart from our failures, our sins, but with them and through them.

From our sins we can and are to learn what is disordered with us, what needs to be healed, what regimen we must undergo. Our failures, our sins, are in fact, in that odd way which makes no sense to us because it is the wisdom of God ... they are blessings by which we are saved. For without them and the havoc they wreck in our lives and the life of the world and the death to which they bring us, we would not go to God.

Our Lady Julian, blessed English mystic of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, said, "All of us experience a wonderful mixture of both well-being and woe. It is necessary for us to fall. If we did not fall, we would have the wrong idea about ourselves. Eventually we will understand that we are never lost to God's love."

We have no license to fail, to sin. To presume we do, and so to act, is one of the deadliest choices a human can make. Yet we will fail, we will sin. This is the way of our pilgrimage. We each have a ragged cross to bear, upon which we shall be crucified: it is the cross of our sinful self.

And this is how we must go along this pilgrim way: We must struggle against sin, not for one fraction of a moment conceding its dominion. It will occasion us grief and sorrow. Please God, may it torment us! But we should hate not God for it. It is the only way he could save such an arrogant, prideful creature as you and I: not apart from our sins, but through them. Nor, on this pilgrimage, should we turn from God in shame or self-reproach. He has seen many like us crawling towards him. His compassion is as great as His creation. The Cross and his willing embrace of it is the evidence of this.

So, we shall be tempted and fall and then we must return to the way of repentance and struggle. And then be tempted and fall and return again a thousand times and a thousand, even to a thousand thousand. For out of this tribulation comes to us a peace, deep in the soul and surer than any dream.\*

The name of that peace is Jesus, the Son who from our beginning begged our life of his Father. And won it through the sacrifice of himself, when he allowed us to raise him on a cross, and drain from him his blood and spirit in an agony of affliction. Therefore, far be it, indeed, from us to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.

*\* This paragraph and the one preceding draw upon Alan Paton's "Meditation for a Young Boy Confirmed, part XIII"*