

Before I moved here, I went to a going away party for someone else. The guest of honor, the nephew of my former Director of Music, was a young man named Nelson. He was leaving to serve as a missionary in Liverpool, England and appropriately, we had a supper of shepherd's pie. Nelson is a faithful Episcopalian, but I wound up sitting next to an atheist, whose name I do not recall. And this was the annoying kind of atheist: the kind who think they're smarter than everybody else, while, ironically, having little evidence to back up that belief. The kind who manifest their deep insecurity by making it obvious that they have something to prove. I was wearing my collar, and apparently he felt like he had a golden opportunity to sound off. He thought he was being clever when he said that he was kind to people who couldn't offer him anything in return, so what did he need Jesus for? And I wanted to say, we have this food on our plates, so what do we need a farmer or a cook for?

In a way, Christianity is a victim of its own success. We have so thoroughly transformed the world's understanding of what it means to be a good person that Christians no longer stand out as having a distinct, or really, a radically different code of ethics from the surrounding culture. So instead I gently told the atheist that you know, pre-Christian Romans generally didn't think they had any obligation to do anything for the most vulnerable among them. Ancient Christians were the only ones who would stay in the city during a plague and tend to the sick at great personal risk, and ancient historians wrote that one of the signs of the spread of Christianity was that you didn't see so many unwanted children left to die of exposure in the wilderness, or thrown into the Tiber.

We might consider what it takes to transform a culture so thoroughly that the transformation itself can fade into obscurity, and what came before, if not forgotten, feels utterly alien to those who are no longer within living memory. On the one hand, societal change on that scale doesn't just happen. On the other, it's not like Jesus was the only one who led a movement to change the common perception of right and wrong.

In recent centuries, abolitionists applied Christian principles and succeeded in abolishing slavery, and that victory of righteousness seems secure. Within living memory, the civil rights movement, also visibly under Christian leadership, also transformed society. Interracial marriage went from being broadly unpopular to so widely accepted that pollsters no longer ask the question. Although the work of the civil rights movement remains shamefully incomplete.

But contrast these movements with, for example, the 20th century German and Russian movements of fascism and communism. The latter was avowedly atheist, while the former paid lip service to Christianity but intended to subordinate the Church until it could take its place. Both were appallingly brutal. We might forget that for a time, reasonable people feared that one or the other of those anti-Christian movements might take over the world. Now, we have to teach children what they were. While standing up to evil is essential, I am confident that evil will always, inevitably, fail.

The words of Jesus in today's Gospel sound overblown, but to the original audience, they would have rung true, because by following Jesus, they had put themselves into conflict with the rest of the world. Today people might think that being a Christian means going to church, or even just believing certain things about Jesus, but for the first generations of our faith, being a Christian meant defying the surrounding culture, and quite often, putting yourself into conflict with your own family.

Don't get me wrong, this conflict wasn't coming from a feeling of hostility or contempt toward non-Christians. Jesus wasn't teaching that. Rather, he described the conflict as an inevitable consequence, just like how a cloud promises rain, or a certain wind portends scorching heat. Nelson was travelling to a United Kingdom that lately has become more hostile to immigrants, for the purpose of helping immigrants. And of course he would be a foreigner there himself. Like every good and faithful missionary, Nelson wasn't going on this journey because he was looking for trouble; on the contrary, he was looking to help people in Christ's name. Yet, he knew that he will be pushing back on a growing anti-foreigner sentiment in an increasingly post-Christian country.

And I don't think that's a coincidence. While it's certainly true that non-Christians may share the values taught by Jesus and his church, when one doesn't have any tie to the source of those values, it's hard to say just why anyone else should uphold them. Live and let live, and all that. But we aren't born knowing that you're supposed to welcome the foreigner and show them hospitality. As an inherently tribal species, we have to be taught that, and some people teach the opposite. Without the understanding that love of the other is commanded by God, and the opposite is an affront to God, why should anyone say that one is right and the other, wrong? When there's no concept that any source of values has any authority, live and let live becomes everyone for themselves, or might makes right. As the Book of Judges describes, centuries before Jesus, "In those days there was no king in Israel, but every man did that which was right in his own eyes." How do you think that played out?

Western culture might well be sliding back into such a state. As fewer people participate in the life of the church, fewer people know our sacred story and the values God has revealed through it. More people believe misconceptions and caricatures about Christianity. For a generation or two we might still have a cultural consensus that it's nice to help people in need, even if most people can't quite say why. Could we be enjoying a nice hot shepherd's pie after the kitchen has closed, and the farmer forced from his land? Are we savoring the tasty leftovers of a banquet that will not be offered again?

Shortly after that going-away party, I was on Long Island to celebrate a baptism for the child of a close friend. And I was heartened not just to be administering the sacrament, but to see that people of different generations and backgrounds, including many non-Christians had traveled great distances to celebrate with us and enthusiastically embraced their charge to "do all in [their] power to support this person in

his life in Christ.” The joy this diverse assembly felt from investing our time to celebrate the baptism of a new Christian and welcome that child into Christ’s church told me that the Jesus movement is far from over.

Even in those days before Jesus, with no assurance of salvation, a few people did boldly hear and carry out the will of God. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews remembered their stories, writing, “By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace... Time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets — who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight.” If these great heroes of old could be so bold without knowing that God would bring them to perfection in heaven, how much more bold might we be in bringing grace, mercy, and love into the world, standing up for the least of these and serving them in Jesus’s most holy name?

Far from savoring leftovers, we are enjoying appetizers, celebrating a foretaste of the feast God has in store for us, the feast God also longs to share with the world, through us. We should first be grateful to God, but also grateful to the generations of Christians before us who invested in, and sacrificed for, the Church— so that Christ’s message might be handed down to us in ways that pique our curiosity, capture our imagination, and inspire our consciences. And then we might well ask, how will we respond to all this generosity? Will we seek merely to be polite but passive recipients? Will we offer only the lowest effort that we think we can live with? Or will our rich experience of God’s grace inspire us to express God’s love as boldly as our heroes did, to live out our faith in whatever ways the moment might call for?