Sermon on Easter 4 Year B 2021

In the seventh and final book of the Narnia series called *The Last Battle,* C.S. Lewis tells the story of the end of that world; the children watch the grandeur unfold from inside the stable door. The stable like all the good things connected to Aslan is bigger on the inside than the outside.

On the inside is Aslan’s own true country a limitless space of unfolding and ever-increasing beauty. But they’re not the only ones to discover it. Also within the stable is Emeth, a Calormene, who has spent his life worshiping the demon-like god of the Calormenes: Tash.

Emeth is as surprised as the children at his inclusion in this new world. In response to the children’s questioning he describes his encounter with Aslan, “The Glorious One bent down his golden head and touched my forehead with his tongue and said, Son, thou art welcome. But I said, Alas, Lord, I am no son of Thine, but the servant of Tash.”

“He answered, Child, all the service thou hast done to Tash, I account as service done to me….I overcame my fear and questioned the Glorious One and said, Lord is it then true, as the Ape said, that thou and Tash are one? The Lion growled so that the earth shook and said, It is false…we are opposites.”

Emeth has worshipped Tash wholeheartedly thinking he was the truth, even opposing Aslan, and Aslan, astoundingly, has taken to himself the honest worship of Emeth because all truth seeking is a desiring of the one Truth.

Today’s readings, seemed to me, at least, as good a place as any, to tackle a question that Lewis’ story implicitly asks and answers: Is the worship of Christ the only way to God’s Country? Is it true, and if true, what does it mean when Peter in our reading says, “there is salvation in no one else but Jesus?”

If Peter were to offer his speech in a crowded square in our fair city there would no doubt be many responses: there would be some who would say, “preach it brother;” others would say “what arrogance, we know that truth is complex and so relative.”

Some would say, “how *irrelative,* we’ve got bigger fish to fry than dealing with outdated ‘who’s got true religion’ questions.” Other would say, “how intolerant, all religious paths lead up the same mountain!”

Indeed, in our day—and within the church—these objections are often enough to question the importance of that which explains the rise of Christianity in the first place and what we celebrate explicitly for seven weeks: the Resurrection.

As I was saying last week, if we take the Resurrection as some weird myth about the resuscitation of a man or as another way to talk about the “aliveness” of Jesus’ teaching, then we might as well call it something else.

Because Resurrection is by very definition *the* *most* audacious and radical reality: the inbreaking of what should happen at the end of the world: the eternal reality of God being all in all, breaking into ordinary time: the Divinocene into the midst of the Anthropocene:

God’s Commitment to act in time and be present as the great Invitation to Life within all that is chaotic; the great promise that overcomes even our worst impulses, overcomes even death. That which is holding humanity together even as try to tear each other apart.

This view of the Resurrection as it developed in the early church seems to absolutely overwhelm all other religious truth and experience and so, has, unfortunately, given rise to the idea that when Christians rightly say in response to it by saying “Jesus is Lord,” everything else is wrong and nobody who doesn’t explicitly acknowledge Jesus is opposing God!

This in turn raises the objections I’ve mentioned. But it all turns, I believe on a misunderstanding, a misunderstanding of what Peter said and of what Jesus means in our reading from John’s gospel. For Jesus by dint of his Resurrection is now not the Tyrant of history and humankind but its servant!

The very name Jesus, a form of Joshua and one of the most common of names in Israel means, “Yahweh Saves” or, as we would say, “God rescues,” or “God puts things right.”

Jesus *is* what he serves, Salvation! He is not the inventor of God’s will nor the beginning of it’s recognition in humankind. He is it’s Servant par excellence.

From the first chapter of Genesis where humans are made in the image and likeness of God they have sought to understand; they have sought beauty, goodness and truth believing that these transcendentals are connected to divinity.

But of course humanity’s penchant for tearing each other apart has gotten in the way and so in the midst of that chaos that God calls Abraham and Sarah to begin a society through whom all the families of the earth are to be blessed.

And we wonder how can that be for their descendants are themselves taken up by strife and end up enslaved.

Through Moses, God gives the freed, brand-new nation special provisions for salvation, rescue from oppression: woven into its constitution are laws for the rescue of people in debt, laws meant to protect the wholeness of the land and laws that provide ways to make peace with God through sacrifices of atonement.

It is all of this that Jesus is serving, bringing to light and indeed demonstrating. When Peter says “there is salvation in no one else” he is claiming that Jesus is the embodiment, the very will of “Yahweh Saves” in human form.

When he claims that there is “no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved” he is not claiming that those who didn’t “believe in Jesus” couldn’t be saved or were not participating in Salvation; to claim that he’d have to deny that Adam and Eve, Abraham, Sarah and Moses participated in this salvation.

Rather he is reiterating what all Israelites believed: God is a Saving God, Jesus’ name and life echo that will and action and now, in the Resurrection, God has demonstrated that Jesus is God’s unique embodiment of this will, so much so that even praying “in his name,” leads to the wholeness they all want, e.g. the cripple that has been healed.

so we too are urged to “believe in him,” to know that God is working to make whole our lives, Israel and the nations. Abraham and Sarah come home to roost, the Image of God in all humans come home to roost as it were!

And because Jesus is the Servant, not a tyrant, he takes to himself all service; even service that seems, at first blush to be opposed to Him, the Emeth story, maybe some of those who crucified Jesus himself, some of those who rejected the cornerstone in good conscience.

We can, I believe, in light of Christ’s Resurrection, affirm God’s Saving will wherever we see it, whoever performs it, be they scientist or politician, be they of our creed or another.

So does this mean Christ really is, at the end of the conversation, just another “path?” up the mountain? We have to brace for the truth here, yes, in one respect that’s right; there were people who related to God, followed God’s inclinations in their hearts and minds long before Christ lived

and in the centuries since he has lived, outside of any knowledge that he did live or, like Emeth, in opposition to him, or at least in opposition to how he was represented to them.

But from another angle we can say there would be no knowledge of “salvation,” salvation as wholeness, as the possibility for unity amongst our diversity without him. Our vison for truth made whole has been made possible *by* Him!

For through Him, we have seen that God “saves” by “serving,” that God doesn’t lord it over us, but loves to the uttermost; as our reading from 1 John says “We know love by this, that he laid down his life us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.”

The whole world longs for the pastoral wholeness we see reflected in Psalm 23, and in our gospel reading; it’s there in every religion and culture; it’s part of what we mean by the “image of God” in all of us.

And yet, how to get free from our fears, and our resulting slaveries? Only through a God who Saves, only through the Resurrection, God’s eternal presence making our human freedom possible with new boldness.

If we want to reckon with the complexity of truth in our world, with the multitude of “big questions” roiling our planet and live as generous pluralists, able to listen to people, but more than just listen, roll up our sleeves and work with people of goodwill everywhere, we are immeasurably helped by participating in a community that explicitly acknowledges faith in the Risen Son of God, Servant of Humanity, able in Divine Humility to accept the service of all.

It is as we gather at this table in fellowship that we are helped to encounter an even more poignant question than the one I’ve been exploring, this one from or second reading: “How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help?”