A Return to the Road

October 24th, 2021

Some weeks ago, I began to speak of hope, and I began by speaking of cobblestone roads. Roads will always be powerful symbols of hope because they allow us to travel, to work, to provide, to dream, to hope. In our province, dense with impassable mountains, fjords, bogs and thick forests, it is not hard to appreciate the value of a good road. When I was a child in Hokkaido, there were not many good roads in the countryside. Most of them were still gravel roads. The long trips to our favourite lake were characterized by slow, grinding, rattling drives on gravel through the backwoods. The long trips into the farmlands to the east were likewise characterized by bumpy rides or crawling heavy traffic on narrow highways lined with the iodine-red lamps of road workers grading and paving new paths into the interior. Then I returned one winter, many years later, and I could not believe how, even in the snowfall, one could easily travel to different towns with such speed. I began to think of all the places I wanted to go. Roads made for new possibilities. One thing I lament is that there are very few icons of Christ just walking the roads of Galilee and Judea. In Christian iconography, we often see Christ as an infant, being baptized, being transfigured, being crucified, being resurrected. One hardly ever sees him just walking, just praying, one cobblestone at a time. That is not to say that his baptism, death and resurrection were not important—quite the contrary! But in between each of those milestones is the Christ who walks, steadily, dauntlessly, hopefully—through sunshine and shadow, through bright mornings and deep nights, through the desert and the woods, through the towns and the fields, Christ bringing the one thing needed—Christ bringing himself to the world. And that is all I want to tell you today. All I want to say is that hope is Christ. It looks like Christ because it is Christ. Whatever does not look like Christ in your life is not hope and never will be hope, for you or for the world.

It is impossible to selectively illustrate this from the gospels because every single event, miracle, and parable in the gospels speaks this clearly and beautifully. Consider the hope we feel when we see Christ overcome the Devil during his temptation in the wilderness (Luke 4), or the hope we sense when he cures the demoniac (Mark 5). Consider the hope that dawns when we see him feed the hungry (Mark 6) or calm storms (Mark 4). Christ comes to the lepers, the soldiers, the tax collectors, the adulterers, the murderers, the thieves, the sick and the poor. Nobody is excluded. The only ones excluded are those who exclude themselves. The only hopelessness we see in the gospels are the scenes when men and women turn away from Christ, mock Christ, or leave the path that Christ walks. It is never Christ who excludes or pushes away—it is only the proud, the stubborn, the rebellious, and the dishonest who resist the Holy Spirit and the hope that shines in Jesus of Nazareth. As Jesus himself would say: “‘Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.’” (Mark 2:17).Most of the great stories of Jesus involve forgiving, healing, and teaching, or demonstrating his power over all the elements of nature. All of them demonstrate the hope that comes from humble obedience to the Father and following the Holy Spirit. All of them offer a gate into contemplation, a way of seeing the unseen and unknown God. I love Jesus walking through the grain fields, picking ears of wheat on the Sabbath (Mark 2:23-28). I love Jesus leading the two disciples to come see his home (John 1:35-42). I love reading of Jesus raising Lazarus, calling him from his tomb—I want to be likewise called out of my tomb. My spiritual tomb of sins. My physical tomb when I die. I want to come out of those tombs, be freed of my bandages, and see the loving Jesus, calling me by name. And I love the utter humility and joy of Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey (Luke 19:28-44). Hosanna in the highest! I love it when Jesus heals Blind Bartimaeus (Mark 10:46-52). I love imagining Bartimaeus able to see the one who healed him, and following him down the road.

Roads are useless unless you are able to walk, to drive, or to ride. And thus, today I want to speak of how Jesus healed the paralytic in the Gospel of Matthew: “And after getting into a boat he crossed the water and came to his own town. And just then some people were carrying a paralysed man lying on a bed. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, ‘Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven.’ Then some of the scribes said to themselves, ‘This man is blaspheming.’ But Jesus, perceiving their thoughts, said, ‘Why do you think evil in your hearts? For which is easier, to say, “Your sins are forgiven”, or to say, “Stand up and walk”? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins’—he then said to the paralytic—‘Stand up, take your bed and go to your home.’” (Matthew 9:1-6). It is a miracle of remission and commission. The first part is remission—Jesus forgives the sins of the paralytic. He does not heal him yet; he does not give him a warm meal; he does not listen to his problems and life story; he does not ask what injustices need to be redressed. He forgives his sins. The one great obstacle to hope is sin because our sin separates us from God. All of our sins are acts of rebellion, acts and thoughts that lack love, and God is love. When we stray from love, we stray from God. We stray from hope.The one great thing we all have in common, regardless of whether we are rich or poor, famous or anonymous, powerful or weak, educated or illiterate, privileged or underprivileged, is our hopelessness—our sin and its consequent death (Romans 3:23, Romans 6:23)—that is our separation from a living, loving, redeeming God. In healing the paralytic of his sins, Jesus first offers him the most important hope—the hope of being reunited with God. Whether he can walk physically or not, the road to God is now open. There is nothing to hinder the paralytic from being with his Saviour. There is no guarantee that any of us are going to become rich, become influential, become useful, become healthy, become normal, become successful, become whatever it is that the world wants us to become, become whatever it is we think we need to become. It is, however, guaranteed that we will all fail in some way and we will all die. And that is a heavy burden to carry around in life. It is an impossible burden. It is hopeless, spiritual paralysis. And yet, with just a few words, Jesus removes the greatest obstacle to human hope, saying: “Your sins are forgiven”. That is the road to the holy and everlasting God.

Roads become useful and desirable when we have the means now to walk them. The second part of the miracle is the commission: “But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins’—he then said to the paralytic—‘Stand up, take your bed and go to your home.’” (Matthew 9:6). Hope is to receive this commission, these commands of Jesus that return us to a life of walking with God. We hear echoes of these commands on the day of Pentecost, when the crowd is paralyzed with guilt and remorse and cries out for a way to be saved. And Peter says: “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). Again, we hear an echo after Paul’s vision on the road to Damascus: “So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, ‘Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.’ And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength” (Acts 9:17-19). The modern gospel often stresses the physical healing, but we are quite content to let people remain in their mortality and spiritual paralysis. The modern gospel rarely encourages people to stand up, carry their own burdens in the Lord, and return to their home—that is, to the lifelong abiding in our true home, which is Christ. The real gospel empowers and sets free. It gives healing and strength. It gives you a road and the means to walk it. It commissions you with places to go and things to do, with others to help. It is at one time personal and yet transcends the personal. It is inside and outside. That is precisely what hope is. Stand up! Be strong again in the Holy Spirit! Carry your bed—that is, your testimony—the evidence of what God has done for you. Return to your home—that is to say, return to the beginning, to the One who created you, formed you, and hoped for you for millennia before you were even born and gave Himself for you. Return to the home where the Great Physician is waiting for you, waiting to commune with you, teach you, help you, befriend you and love you. Hope looks like Christ healing the paralytic, forgiving his sins and giving him a new life. And even if the man had remained paralyzed, Jesus would not have failed. As Jesus would say to the disciples: “It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life” (John 6:63). And indeed, this fulfills what the psalmist says: “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Psalm 119:105). There is no hope without the Spirit, and the Spirit comes through Christ. True paralysis is not to have Christ, to be overcome with our own brokenness, our godless habits, our guilt, our unforgiven sins, our despair at being unable to become who we are meant to become in God, our contempt for ourselves and our contempt for others, our sheer impossible existential dilemma. It is so impossible to save the world and save ourselves! Yet, as Jesus said of salvation: “‘For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible.’” (Matthew 19:26).

It is my prayer that followers of Christ in our time will return to the Way, to the gospel, to live it fully, to live it in hope, to live it in a way that looks like Christ. For Jesus Christ is the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6). Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever (Hebrews 13:8). For Christ is loving, joyful, peaceful, patient, kind, generous, faithful, gentle, and self-controlled (Galatians 5:22-23). Jesus is poor in spirit, mournful and meek; Jesus hungers and thirsts for righteousness; Jesus is merciful; Jesus is pure in heart. Jesus is a peacemaker; Jesus is persecuted for being righteous and reviled for being who he is, which is just Jesus. Jesus is salt and light (Matthew 5:1-16). And to him belongs the kingdom of heaven. Jesus is patient; Jesus is kind; Jesus is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. Jesus does not insist on His own way; Jesus is not irritable or resentful; Jesus does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. Jesus bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Jesus Christ never ends (1 Corinthians 13:4-8) and Jesus Christ alone saves (Acts 4:12). Hope looks like the man of Galilee hanging on the cross. Hope looks like the risen Christ walking the road to Emmaus. Hope looks like the unseen Christ sitting beside you or walking alongside you today, waiting for you to open your heart to Him, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Messiah appointed for you, that is, Jesus, who must remain in heaven until the time of universal restoration that God announced long ago through his holy prophets (Acts 3:19-20). Jesus is hope. Jesus saves. May Christ in you, the hope of glory, open your eyes today to all that is good in Him and all that is good on the road ahead, the road back to the loving God who saves.