The Pavement

March 6th, 2022

1 Sunday of Lent

 Once in a while, you will see the miracle of a blade of grass gleaming through the cracks of asphalt on a road. It is striking because it is not the norm. Asphalt is not soil. Nothing can grow in it. It is only when it cracks open to bare the soil beneath it that something can find its way in there, receive the sun and rain, and then sprout. It can be a hopeful image and a distressing image, depending on how you look at it. The season of Lent has come, when tradition calls us to repent and turn our minds to the Lord to prepare for Easter. The tradition has some limitations. I believe every day is Easter for the believer—we live the resurrection life now, in part, and we will live it in full in the world and age to come. Jesus is the resurrection and the life (John 11). Moreover, I believe that we are called to repent throughout the year, to turn to God and be healed, as Jesus told Nicodemus: “And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life” (John 3:14). Charles Spurgeon once spoke of the power of just looking to the cross, looking to Christ in order to be healed (“Sovereignty and Salvation,” January 6th, 1856). The Risen Christ is our healing; the resurrection is our healing, and our belief in that resurrection is what overcomes sin in our lives. Our age laughs at such thoughts. Our age does not believe in righteousness or the risen life, and thus we cannot repent of our sins. Our age is obsessed with the injustices of others but apathetic towards personal sin. And yet all around us, the destruction of the world is easily traced to individuals and even collective bodies of individuals who have not repented of personal sin and continue to walk the path of darkness. If you do not believe in sin, you cannot believe that you are a sinner. And if you do not believe that you are a sinner, then you will not repent of sin. You will persist in sin, and you will encourage others to persist in sin. Jesus himself said: “‘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). The gospel is for the sick who want to be cured. The wounds of Christ on the cross are evidence that sin is real and that it needed to be washed away. To deny sin and to deny the sacrifice of Jesus is to deny the grace of God, it is to deny God Himself.

 Though it is not that difficult to talk about sin—the scriptures are very clear on what sin is and what specific things are sins (Exodus 20:1-21, Proverbs 6:16-19, Matthew 23, Romans 1, Galatians 5:16-21)—we can become so detached from God that it can be hard to imagine it or visualize it. And yet, a certain religious imagination is integral for life, if we ever hope to grow in mercy, love, wisdom, virtue or godliness, if we hope to abide in Christ and have the Holy Spirit abide in us. It is impossible to really grasp our existential and spiritual condition when we persist in sin, especially if we have not really learned what sin is, and this ignorance or blindness further hurts us and those around us. In our reading today, Jesus provides us with a clear and simple picture of what sin looks like—for sin is, in one sense, nothing less than the rejection of the grace of God. As he teaches in the Parable of the Sower: “‘Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away. Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.’” (Mark 4:3-8). The four different terrains speak of four different dispositions of the human heart. One of them is faithful, and the others are not—they are images of sin and rebellion. Throughout the next four weeks, I want to look at these four terrains and how they relate to our spiritual dispositions.

 The first terrain, which I will address today, is a path or a road. When the disciples ask the meaning of the parable, Jesus says: “The sower sows the word. These are the ones on the path where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them” (Mark 4:14-15). I see this all the time. Pigeons, chickadees, finches, towhees, robins pecking at the pavement where seeds or crumbs have fallen. Pavement, modern or ancient, sophisticated or crude, is formidable—it does not allow the seed to sink into the ground and hide from ravenous beaks. It is not designed to receive seed. It is not open and soft. It is hard. I first want to speak of its purpose, however. A path is a means for traveling. On its own, it does nothing. It is meant to be used. In scripture, paths and roads are often positive symbols, but there is a sense in which a path can be negative. As Jesus would teach the disciples: “‘Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it” (Mark 7:13-14). The road can be a different experience for different intentions. For the commuter, it is a means to get to work. For the drunk driver, it is a means to destroy property and human life. For some people, life is a road of pilgrimage, discovery, and service. For others, it is just tourism, or worse, a nightmare of wandering without purpose. When you read *The Canterbury Tales,* you can see different types of people on the road—some with noble characters and some with very ignoble characters. The intention of the journey might seem the same on the surface—they are going to Canterbury—but their speech and behaviour and the stories they tell seem to speak volumes as to whether they are really open to God or not. To return to our symbol, however, we find that we are dealing with something that seems to travel but does not really go anywhere. The pavement just lies there. Many of us want to go through life being pavement—functional, winding through the landscape, willing even to be trod on, but not soil that can move, receive, or produce anything before the birds of life steal everything. It is a sad way of living that allows one to be robbed spiritually. Life passes over us and by us but does not enter us.

 The pavement is hard and passive. What makes it hard? In ancient times, it was the wheels of carts, the hooves of pack animals, the feet of travelers, and even weather conditions, like drought. In other words, other things, external things. To live life as pavement is to be passive, to let the world decide who you will be and what you will do, to let the pressures and desires of life form you and bake you into a hard path. The wide road and the wide gate of letting the dominant discourse or the caprices of culture and fashion determine your shape. I once had to take a course in cultures of protest and counter-culture—and it never ceased to amaze me how conformist even the most non-conformist movements could be. Life is going to shape us one way or the other—we are made of earth. In our time, roads are made with machinery, and analogously our technology and culture can pave right over us. All of the voices, opinions, habits and prejudices of the world that we passively absorb can bake us and pave us into the impenetrable path of our parable. The birds are just the distractions and temptations and quotidian events that eat whatever good things are given to us—whether it is television, the internet, vain intellectualism, sports, politics, the paralysis of comfort, and even our seeming good deeds, our feelings, and even our guilt—it doesn’t really matter—the Devil is quite open to a diversified approach. In our time, it is perhaps a certain passivity, a paralysis of comfort, a jaded disinterest in the effects of sin, and a sense of our own virtue that act like a steam-roller, hardening us to the reality of our spiritual deprivation. There is no seed in us because the birds have come by and taken it all and we have not heard the gospel, we have not heard God.

The pavement is the heart that never really hears the word of God. And remember, Jesus is not speaking to the irreligious, to the people who have no notion of God. Jesus is speaking to people who claim to seek God, who are steeped in a seemingly religious culture—some of them are even scholars who are better informed and educated than the misguided rabble that we have so much contempt for today. It is significant, however, that Jesus closes the first parable with the words: “‘Let anyone with ears to hear listen!’” (Mark 4:9). And this is essentially what Paul says to the Romans: “The same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. For, ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.’ But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!’ But not all have obeyed the good news; for Isaiah says, ‘Lord, who has believed our message?’ So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ” (Romans 10:12-17). And how precious is the word of Christ! When we do not hear God, speaking as the Lord of the universe, speaking as our personal Saviour and speaking as Lord of our lives, we hear nothing; we are the prey of the birds, robbed daily of the grace and good gifts that the Sower showers upon us. All sin, in some way, relates to not hearing God. For a heart that hears God, that truly hears God, would rejoice in the beauty and goodness of what God gives, as naturally as the enzymes of a seed respond to heat and hydration.

Being pavement is perhaps the saddest kind of spiritual condition. In some ways, in certain aspects of my life, I have been the pavement before—utterly deaf and blind to my own nature and the nature of the world around me because I was locked in my own hardness of heart. And as I persisted in being pavement, I wondered and cried out at the injustice of God who seemed to not be giving me anything. Yet, it is impossible for God not to give. It was my heart that refused to receive from Him. And every possible kind of bird came by and stole what God was trying to give to me because I let the birds steal from me. Habitual sin can have this effect on the human person. The horrifying thing is that we often do not realize we are becoming hard, packed path; we think we are receiving the sown seed, but we are not receiving anything. Perhaps it takes some breakage, some plowing, some rain, or maybe even an earthquake or fire to change the terrain in our lives. Sadly, I have known people who have been through all of that, and somehow remained pavement—just like the ancient roads of antiquity that are still with us today, weathering dynastic struggles, wars, changes of climate and changes of geopolitics, but essentially unchanged for thousands of years. That is a mystery I do not comprehend, but it is there. I pray that God grants me a heart that can be broken again and again, a heart that can be plowed, a heart that can be open to receiving Christ and the words of Christ, that it might give back to God the glory of the harvest. I pray that you will join me in that prayer this season, as we seek to repent and to turn to God with all of hearts, all of our souls, all of our minds, and with all our strength, for that is how we are called to love God. Not passively, not in paralysis or catatonia, but with open, active and ardent hearts looking up to our salvation, hearts that seek first the kingdom of God and its righteousness. Amen.