
Unto God be the glory,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Sermons in August
have offered me
an opportunity
to indulge myself.

Too indulge myself
by drawing your attention
to significant moments,
or persons,
in Church history.

This morning...,
it's the turn of
the 19th century
Danish philosopher,
Søren Kierkegaard.

Of the year of his birth,
Kierkegaard wrote,
with his characteristic
combination of wit
and melancholy
(and I quote):

“I was born in 1813,
the year in which
so many another bad note
was put into circulation”
(end quote).
(Journals and Papers)

It was a year
of national bankruptcy
in Denmark.

*

His life was outwardly
uneventful.

But for a couple
of journeys to Berlin,
he confined himself
in Denmark –

indeed, almost entirely
in Copenhagen,
the city of his birth.

I must forego
telling you about

- his complex relationship
with his father,
- his intense and tragic
love affair with Regine Olsen,
- his complicated connection
with the national Church,
- and his prolific
and profound
literary output.

Instead,
I restrict myself
to Kierkegaard's
defence of the gospel.

You've no doubt heard
of the Enlightenment –
the late 18th/
early 19th Century
cultural revolution
in Europe
and North America.

Politically, it was
dramatically represented
by the French and American
revolutions –
violently rejecting
monarchy
and the old regimes.

Philosophically
and religiously,
it was marked by
suspicion, and often
outright rejection of

- traditional Christianity,
- orthodox theology,
- and the established Church –
whether Rome, Canterbury,
Geneva, or Wittenberg.

*

The German philosopher,
 Immanuel Kant,
 says it best,
 in a short article
 published in 1784,
 with the title –
 “What is Enlightenment?”
 (and I quote):
 “Enlightenment
 is humanity’s emergence
 from a self-induced childhood.
 “To be a [child],
 is to be incapable
 of using one’s understanding
 without being directed
 by another....
 “The time has come
 to cast aside
 the apron strings
 of traditional political
 and religious institutions.
 “*Sapere aude!*
 “Think for yourself...
 is the motto
 of the [Enlightenment]”.
 (end quote)
 (I. Kant, *What is Enlightenment?* [1784])

Kierkegaard was born
 into this world of
 radical new beginnings.

His upbringing
 and education,
 together with
 his Christian faith,
 compelled him
 to take seriously
 the implications
 of Kant’s challenge.

Is it still possible
 to be a Christian,
 to believe in Jesus Christ?

Or, is Christianity
 one of those childish things
 to be jettisoned
 for the sake of
 the new-found
 maturity, freedom,

and creativity
of the Enlightenment?

Kierkegaard
identified 3
current responses
to those questions.

In a variety of guises,
they continue to be
the major responses
of the Christian church
to modernity's challenges.

The first,
is the moralism
of Immanuel Kant.

Kant stripped Christianity
of everything theological
and supernatural,
reducing it to ethics.

Jesus is an inspiring
moral example.

As the embodiment
of universal moral values,
Jesus alerts us
to those same values
written on our hearts
and consciences,
and inspires us
to live by them.

*

The problem is...,
once we've got hold
of those moral values,
we don't really need
Jesus anymore!

Bishop Spong,
Donald Crossan,
and Marcus Borg,
are recent representatives

of this moralistic reduction
of the Christian faith.

Kant's younger contemporary,
Hegel,
represents a very
different attempt
to develop an
enlightened Christianity.

We must no longer
think of God
- as transcendent,
- as other than we are,
- as outside of creation
and history.

Instead,
everything is in God,
and God is in everything.

Creation and history
are a comprehensive process
within which God
is coming
to his own full
self-consciousness.

The modern age,
marks the final stage –
the consummation –
of the whole process.

Hegel saw Jesus
as the key
to unlocking
the whole thing.

What the church
had hitherto taught
to be unique to Jesus –
namely, the union
of divine and human natures
in his person –
has become universal.

Emmanuel,
'God with us' –
the name given
by the angel
to the infant Jesus –

is no longer
restricted to Jesus.

It's open to all of us,
- God with us,
- God in us,
- God is us –
identified absolutely
with us in our history,
in our becoming
from now on.

*

But again –
as with Kantian moralism –
once we've unlocked
the secret –
Jesus becomes
supernumerary,
except as a kind of
cypher, symbol,
visual aid!

New-age spiritualities,
the religious speculations
of Carl Jung,
the writings of Tom Harpur
and Karen Armstrong,
are modern variations
on this Hegelian vision.

The third option
that Kierkegaard discerns,
was formulated
by Hegel's contemporary –
Friedrich Schleiermacher.

Schleiermacher
is to theology,
what Keats, Wordsworth,
and the other romantics
are to poetry.

For him,
religion is
- deeper than language,
- deeper than thought,
- deeper than morality.

It is, most profoundly,
an inner experience
of the heart.

Through our feelings,
we touch the divine.

Authentic
religious experience,
Schleiermacher
famously described as
(and I quote)
“...the feeling of absolute dependence”.
(F. Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 132)

The beauty of nature,
intimate friendship,
music,
Christmas eve worship,
and so much else,
can induce the feeling.

Jesus possessed it
to a supreme degree.

Schleiermacher called him
the “virtuoso” of religious feeling.

Attending to Jesus –
Jesus released from
the mythological,
doctrinal accretions
of earlier ages –
- miracles,
- death on the cross
(Schleiermacher believed
Jesus merely swooned),
- and the resurrection –
we can be inspired
to share something
of his exalted
religious experience.

*

It's hard to identify
particular modern
representatives,

because Schleiermacher's
influence on modern,
western Christianity
is so all-pervasive.

Kierkegaard
was convinced
none of these options
does justice to the gospel.

Each of them,
in spite of appearances,
is a profound and subtle
evasion of:
- Jesus Christ,
- and the God of the Bible.

One of Kierkegaard's works –
Fear and Trembling –
is an extended study
of the story of Abraham
and God's command
that he sacrifice
his son, Isaac.

We're invited to see
that our moralistic
reduction of Christianity –
à la Kant –
only succeeds in
domesticating God.

Reduced to our
enlightened standards
of right and wrong,
the altogether
more disturbing
God of the Bible
is rendered obsolete.

A domesticated God,
a God refashioned
in our own image,
is no God at all!

The challenge
for Kierkegaard
was how to recover
the God of the Bible

and the gospel of Jesus Christ,
without setting himself up
as a proponent
of yet another
version of Christianity
that has no more claim
to our allegiance
than any of the others.

As children
of the Enlightenment,
are we merely left
with a potentially
infinite number
of more or less
adequate versions
of the gospel,
with no objective criteria
for preferring one
over the others?

*

The question of authority,
counterfeit or real, is –
in Kierkegaard's own words –
(and I quote)
“the most important
ethico-religious concept”,
and, as such,
“the central problem
of my life and work”.
(end quote)
(Dru, “Introduction” to *The Present Age*, 22)

Is Kant's conscience,
or Hegel's intellect,
or Schleiermacher's
feeling and experience,
the final arbiter
for each of us?

And is it finally
up to each of us
where we settle?

How do we hear
the God of the gospel?

How do we testify
to that God

so that others hear –
not ourselves –
but that God
of the gospel?

How do we live
in allegiance to
the living Lord Jesus Christ?

Must we settle
for God on our terms,
or can we be placed
so that God has us
on God's terms?

These are Kierkegaard's questions.

*

And that's his genius: –
to have examined
and found wanting
the various enlightened
options on offer,
and to have identified
and raised the questions
that need to be asked.

*

And he never pretended
to have the answer!

Kierkegaard was critical
of contemporary preachers.

Too often,
they translated the gospel –
rendering it acceptable,
attractive, relevant –
so that their listeners
could assent to it
on their own terms.

“Parsons' trash”
he called it: –
the scandal and offense
of the crucified Christ,

replaced with
an innocuous,
counterfeit gospel.

*

Neither an apostle,
nor a pastor,
nor a preacher –
without authority –
Kierkegaard sought
to carve out space
in the maelstrom
of enlightened modernity, –
space where men and women
might hear again
the transcendent,
demanding,
and paradoxical word
of the crucified Christ.

The Word that calls –
not for discussion
and interpretation –
but for penitent surrender
and faith.

St Paul says it best,
and with this I conclude.

*Has not God made foolish
the wisdom of the world?...
Jews demand signs
and Greeks desire wisdom,
but we proclaim Christ crucified,
a stumbling block to Jews
and foolishness to Gentiles,
but to those who are the called,
both Jews and Gentiles,
Christ, the power of God,
and the wisdom of God.*

*For God's foolishness
is wiser than human wisdom,
and God's weakness
is stronger than human strength."*
(1 Cor 1.20, 22-25; cf., Jer 9.23f.)

*

*To him be the glory,
forever and ever. Amen.*
(Rm 11.36)