

“A Message Too Good To Be True – And It Is!”

In the name of our risen Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, grace to you and peace.

Okay, here's a Stratford question for you. What is the first play by Shakespeare you ever read? For those of us my age, older and quite a bit younger, it was the Merchant of Venice, that is if you grew up with the Ontario high school curriculum. Grade 10 followed by Romeo and Juliet, Macbeth, and Hamlet. For some reason, they didn't let us read Shakespeare in Grade 9.

Now at the same time as we were reading Shakespeare, our English literature teachers introduced to us to Greek mythology. The Odyssey, the Iliad, and the like, epics by the Greek poet and storyteller, Homer. What always struck me is that as I read these stories, is how much better, how much nobler, are the human heroes than the gods in these stories. In the Odyssey and most of the Greek myths, the gods are vindictive, petty, deceitful, lecherous, they play favourites. They make a sport out of interfering in human lives. The goddess, Calypso keeps poor Odysseus prisoner on her island, far from Ithaca, from his wife and son, because she wants him as her own. Poseidon, the God of the seas, also keeps Odysseus from making it home, inflicting disaster after disaster on him and his men. On Mount Olympus, the gods compete with each other, using poor Odysseus as a pawn in their power struggles with one another. These gods, were not good guys, and the goddesses weren't much better.

It is no wonder that Socrates, the Greek philosopher, did not encourage his students to read these stories. He thought that the gods in Greek poetry were immoral and unworthy of respect. Like many, he gave the gods their due, probably observed the public rituals, but after that he left the gods alone.

This view of the ancient gods was fairly common. Once you had offered the appropriate sacrifices, and not violated sacred places, not harmed priests, and definitely don't draw attention to yourself. Don't let the gods become too involved with you, because any glory won from the gods would be offset by a greater measure of suffering. Getting involved with the gods was dangerous and to be avoided.

On the face of it, this is not an unreasonable view of things. Given the fickle nature of glory and of fortune in this life, given our vulnerability to changes in our financial, physical, or romantic status, why would anyone think that the hidden causes operative behind all things, that is, the gods are anything but fickle? Why would we view the gods as anything but unstable, undependable, and erratic?

I daresay that many today still love their lives this way. A lot of people come here asking for baptisms or for weddings or for funerals and we try to oblige them, but I will be honest and say, that sometimes I can't help but think, not by way of judgement or criticism, but by way of observation that many of these people, and I'm not thinking so much of Zion members, that many of these people want to “do the right thing,” to offer the appropriate religious respect, but many of them also keep a careful distance from God and the church. They do not want to get too involved in faith. For some reason, they think it important to get the imprint, perhaps the approval of God at crucial moments in their lives or the lives of their children, but they are wary of greater exposure.

They seem to be playing it safe, doing what is expected, following convention – but no more. And, in this way, some people today are acting just like the ancient pagans. After all, good, upright pagans were never anti-religious. They accepted the gods as offered by their culture. They paid those gods their due respect – to get a blessing or to ward off harm.

Like the ancient pagans, many of us today want to have a little religion at important times, but also

resist allowing God any greater claim on our lives. Perhaps we do not see why God deserves any greater commitment. Perhaps we are afraid and wish not to draw attention to themselves by being either too religious or not religious enough. And, perhaps, as is most likely, we just don't see what God has to do with ourselves, with our lives.

I'm going to be very honest, here, and say frankly I am of two minds about people who approach me for religious ceremonies to be baptized, married, or for a burial. Sometimes, I do feel like asking them if they really don't want God in their lives, then why bother at all. But, on the other hand, and this is the hand I raise, I think that a baptism, a wedding, or a funeral are occasions when people can discover that the Church is of value and that God is not distant or fickle but near, present, and constant, that God in Jesus Christ does care for our lives and that a relationship with God is not arbitrary and vengeful but gentle, warm, and gracious.

Over these Sundays of Easter, we have been reading from the First Letter of John. The overriding theme of that epistle, is "God is love." We Christians have become very familiar with this idea – and maybe, at times, too familiar with it. We do not realize what an astounding view of God this is. To the ancient pagans, this would have been shocking or just absurd. That is why the Apostle Paul described the Good News of Jesus Christ as folly or as foolishness to the Greeks. The Gospel, after all, goes against the common experience of life.

Think of how the vast majority of this planet's inhabitants experience life's poverty, infant mortality, recurring famine, fatal epidemics, natural disasters, deadly war. Think North Korea, Tibet, Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan. And even in affluent Canada, as so many struggle with joblessness and foreclosure, where many don't think of life as happy but as difficult, to claim that God is love goes against so much of our common, human experience.

Nevertheless, as Christians we persist. We even sometimes sing: "God is love and where love is, God is there." We proclaim that God's love transcends and persuades human experience. Perhaps, today, we Christians sometimes proclaim that too glibly. Perhaps we sentimentalize this love. Perhaps, we, when things are going all right for ourselves, forget that is not the case for everyone, and, at times in all our lives, will not be the case for us.

To proclaim that "God is love," to believe that God is love is either to commit ourselves to a radical confession, as I believe with many of you or to see it as escapist fantasy of the highest order, sentimental claptrap, the opiate of the masses as much of the world believes. It is one or the other. There is no middle ground here. Either we are bearers of a new truth about God and the world or we are above all to be pitied as the greatest of fools.

That is the way of the Gospel. We are bearers of the message that God is for you, God is with you, God cares for you and, yes, God loves you. This message should strike us as a message so good as to border folly.

But for Jesus Christ, this Gospel of ours would be folly. In Christ, God brought divine love to common human experience, not to track us, not to make sport of us, not even to judge us or to condemn us, but to join us, to love fully our common human experience, to be born, to love, to suffer, to die, all out of love – and to raise again to show that nothing, not even death, can extinguish this love. This is our hope, our calling, and our mission.

Jesus says in today's gospel reading, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." Our mission as Christians is to lift up love, as the hidden key to life, now revealed in Jesus Christ – to see all love as an echo of the love of God, to name all love as God's, and to be drawn to

this love and to reflect it for the world.

To say “God is love” is not sentimental, not easy, not frivolous. It is a bold confession, even bordering on folly. And it demands a bold commitment and faith. How will anyone believe this faith unless they see it among us? How will anyone be convinced that beneath the pain and suffering of common experience flows divine love – how will anyone know unless we live that way?

My brothers and sisters in Christ. Having been loved by God, we likewise must love, and not just those closest to us or those who are easiest to love. Our love must extend to places and to people where love is foreign, where love is absent, where faith in love has faded or died. To be loved by God is to be given a mission, to take this bold faith to those who just cannot accept it, to the destitute, the broken, to those who have lost hope, and not to tell this improbable truth, but to show them it is true, through our lives and actions. No one will believe it unless they see it in us. Let us pray:

Holy God, you see our world of beauty but also of brokenness. You not only see it, you came in Jesus and lived it with us. You came to show us that your compassion and your love knows no bounds, not even death. Give us the faith to believe this great news and then to let love make a claim on us, to live love, to share love, even in the least loveable times and places and even when those places are in our own lives, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. AMEN.