

Tried and True

(Text: Philippians 3:14-21; Matthew 21:33-46)

G.K. Chesterton, the English essayist and novelist who lived between 1874 and 1936 wrote a book entitled "What is Wrong with the World"? The book was written for a British Parliamentarian and friend named Charles Masterman. In one of the chapters Chesterton is writing about those forces that resulted in the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century. Let me quote him here "My point is that the world did not tire of the church's ideal, but of its reality. Monasteries were attacked not for the chastity of monks, but for the unchastely of monks. Christianity was unpopular not because of the humility, but of the arrogance of Christians." In other words Chesterton is saying that the gospel lost its credibility at that time not because it is erroneous but because of how it was applied. He then goes on to write: "The great ideals of Christianity have at times failed not by being outlived (which must mean over-lived), but by not being lived enough.

"The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried"

St. Paul would have also said "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried." In fact he really did say something like this in Philippians 3. There we read "There are many out there taking other paths, choosing other goals, and trying to get you to go along with them. I've warned you of them many times; sadly I am having to do it again. All they want is easy street. They hate Christ's Cross. But easy street is a dead-end street. Those who live this way make their bellies their gods; belches are their praise; all they can think of is their appetites."

If Paul was living today and found himself channel surfacing and came across one of those reality TV shows called "Bachelor" I think he would say "this is the very kind of thing I mean." The premise of the show is that a young man interviews 25 young women. Then he offers roses to fifteen of them, the other ten are eliminated. From there these fifteen women and this man go to a very luxurious mansion where he wines and dines each of them. He also has intimate relations with them, which may include intercourse. As the weeks pass he eliminates more women until he is down to one. Then he will propose to her

and she will give her response whether or not she will marry him.

Television is a medium that lulls us into looking at life in ways so contrary to the Cross of Christ. For those of us who are Jesus' disciples we need to be aware that the pervasive nature of much of the mass media feeds us the message daily to give less thought to Jesus and a lot more thought to ourselves. Paul saw this as such a big problem in his own day, when there was no mass media as we know it, that he had to warn his fellow believers about these detractors many times. How much more so now do we have to be aware!

Paul then goes on to say that even though there are many who find Christianity too difficult and therefore left untried because of interest in other things, that is not true for him. He has found it to be tried and true.

"But there's far more to life for us. We're citizens of high heaven. We're waiting the arrival of the savior, the Master Jesus Christ, who will transform our earthly bodies into glorious heavenly bodies like his own. He will make us beautiful and whole with the same powerful skill by which he is putting everything as it should be, under and around him."

What a different way to live life from those of whom Paul has just spoken. Paul has laid out before him this remarkable hope that looks to the future with assurance because Jesus Christ is the cornerstone of his life. Everything he thinks, everything he does is motivated by this staggering claim that one day these earthly bodies of ours will be transformed into glorious heavenly bodies. But not only us, everything in creation will one day be as it should be.

C.S. Lewis reflecting on this wonderful doctrine of the total redemption and transformation of creation wrote:

"If you read history you will find that the Christians who did the most for the present world were those who thought the most about the next. The apostles themselves, who set out on foot to convert the Roman Empire, the great men who built up the Middle Ages, the English evangelicals who abolished the slave trade, all left their mark on earth, precisely because their minds were occupied with heaven. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this one. Aim at Heaven and you will get earth thrown in. Aim at earth and you will get neither."

This is also one of the messages of the Parable of the Tenants in the Vineyard. In the parable Jesus quotes Psalm 118 and these words "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone." One way of thinking about this is to see him as the key element in one's life. He is the one around whom all other things are connected and held together". The tenants in the parable didn't live this way. Rather their lives revolved around self and what they could get for themselves. This is the same message Paul presents in the first part of the passage we looked at from Philippians.

As Christians our temptation is not one of total rejection but rather to see Jesus as an important stone in the structure of our life but not as the corner stone. When this happens our faith is more like a hobby rather than a central operating standard from which the rest of our life flows. Then slowly over time Jesus becomes less important to us.

Those in the vineyard, had been cultivating it for five years. The owner had gone away and was not visibly present to them. Although not belonging to them, they thought less and less about the owner with the passing of time. So much so that by the time the son comes they say "This is the heir, let us kill him and get his inheritance". You see, they thought that the owner was now dead and that if they killed the son it would all be theirs. When we forget Jesus is the cornerstone and look at our faith as a hobby we become what I would call functional atheists. We believe in God, but we function -- live and act -- as if there were no God, like the tenants. And when this happens it is so easy for us to be distracted from following Jesus.

When our faith in Jesus is more of a hobby than the corner stone of our life corporate worship is something that we do when we have time for it. Rather than being essential to how we begin the week, we see it as one of a number of choices vying for our attention, just as a hobby can be something we enjoy but not something that we always give as first priority.

When our faith in Jesus is more of a hobby than the corner stone of our life we allow ourselves to be distracted into thinking in ways so contrary to the Cross of Christ. We tend to go along with the world by showing little discrimination in what we watch on television, and in the people with whom we spend our time.

When our faith in Jesus is more of a hobby than the corner stone of our life we give little thought to cultivating a prayer life and the reading of scripture. This takes time and effort. And I think for some this is where Chesterton's comment finds a particular application. The reading of the bible has not been tried and found wanting, it has been found difficult and left untried.

Yet when we come to see more fully that Jesus is to be more than a hobby, he is to be the cornerstone of our lives, we then realize we are not citizens of this world trying to make our way to heaven; we are citizens of heaven trying to make our way through this world. That radical Christian insight can be life-changing. We are not to live so as to earn God's love, inherit heaven, and purchase our salvation. All those are given to us as gifts; gifts bought by Jesus on the cross and handed over to us. We are to live as God's redeemed, as heirs of heaven, and as citizens of another land, the Kingdom of heaven. We can only do this when Jesus is our corner stone.

We live as those who are on a journey home, not as those wanting to take over the vineyard. We know that this is a home that will have the lights on and the door open and our Father waiting for us to arrive. That means in all adversity our worship of God is joyful, our life is hopeful, our future secure. There is nothing we can lose on earth that can rob us of the treasures God has given us and will give us.

This kind of Christianity is no hobby but one that allows Jesus to be all in all to us. And while to live such a life is in many ways more difficult than going along with those whose lives are set on other things, when tried we discover that yes it is true.

Tried and true. Paul knew it to be so. Chesterton knew it to be so. Lewis knew it to be so. I know it to be so. Do you?