

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE HOLY?

Get rid of your old self, which made you live as you used to – the old self that was being destroyed by its deceitful desires ... and put on the new self, which is created in God's likeness and reveals itself in the true life that is upright and holy.

(Ephesians 4:22 & 24 – TEV)

For the followers of Jesus Christ in the first years after his crucifixion, it may have seemed that the man named Saul, from Tarsus, was conducting a one-man “reign of terror”. When Stephen was stoned, the killers threw down their coats at Saul’s feet. Soon, this kind of passive aggression was not enough to satisfy Saul and he actively sought out followers of “the Way” and threw them into jail for no other crime than that they were followers of Jesus. “Saul of Tarsus” became the most feared name in the Christian community.

But then a funny thing happened. Word began to leak out that Saul, whose life had been virtually consumed by a passion to pluck up the Christian movement by its roots, had become a Christian himself. Now, it was said, he was willing to die for Jesus whom he had hated. There’s a switch. The chief persecutor becomes the chief Apostle. The maker of martyrs is prepared to become a martyr himself for the very cause he was trying to destroy.

What made the difference? That’s a great question; let’s let Paul tell us. On trial for his life before King Agrippa, Paul said the change came about when he met Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus, and that life for him was never the same after that.

In the Ephesian passage of our morning text, Paul indicates that when Christ genuinely comes into a person’s life, there are some profound changes that occur as time passes. Christian growth and development take place. Paul describes the changes with these words: “Put off the old self, and put on the new”. Put off the old self, under the control of the old way of living, the old lusts, the old desires of the flesh. Put on the new self, that new aggregate of habits and motivations which mark the life of the changed person in whom Christ has come to dwell.

The contrast Paul draws is a dramatic one. There is a distinctive, qualitative difference between the person who is a Christian and the one who is not, he insists. And that difference on two levels. It is defined, first of all, by a changed life-style. And that change is centered in a new kind of inner motivation which puts Christ, instead of our own selfish desires, at the core of our existence – an observable difference.

If we examine a person's behavior for proof that "the new self" is emerging, we would see one or more of the qualities Paul mentions to the Ephesians as evidence of the Christian life – honesty, hard work, clean speech and a forgiving spirit. But there's that other level, too. And we have to look there to discover those more subjective qualities which describe the qualitative differences being forged within the inner motivations of a person out of which the actions of his life proceed.

The first of those inner changes which transforms the life of action is suggested by Paul in one of his letters from prison – the desire "to know Christ". That prayerful plea had come to characterize the Apostle's life and ministry. Constantly striving to know his Lord more completely, he said in his letter to the young Church at Philippi, "All I want is to know Christ, and to experience the power of his resurrection." (Philippians 3:10)

There is a very great difference between really knowing someone, and just knowing something about him. If someone asked you men after your first date whether you knew a certain girl, you would have said, "of course I do. I had a date with her last night". But what you really mean is that in the course of the evening you learned certain things about her. After you've been married to her for a few years, however, you know her on a completely different level of communication and intimacy. That's true though you might still say the same words: "I know her". After years of marriage, though you know her more completely all the time, you are still getting to know her. It is likely that only in moments of reckless daring would you suggest that you know her completely (and it works that way for both men and women). Learning to know someone – anyone – is a continuing process.

Now what is true on a human level is also true of our relationship with Christ. It is sheer folly to think that we can come to know Him automatically and without the disciplined graces of

prayer, Bible study, worship and witness. But the effort to achieve that knowledge is infinitely worthwhile. It is what makes a Paul out of a Saul of Tarsus, and it is what helps our lives reach toward maturity in Christian faith and practice.

I read a story about a famous actor who was presenting an “Evening with the Classics” at Carnegie Hall. Flawlessly, he quoted from memory large passages from Shakespeare, Browning, and other poets and authors. He concluded his performance with a recitation of the 23rd Psalm. The applause was long and loud. As the actor was taking his second curtain call, he was startled to see an old man walk onto the stage. He was even more astounded when the old gentleman asked his permission to repeat the 23rd Psalm himself. Hesitantly, the actor granted permission. This time at the end of the Psalm there was no applause – only an electric silence and a few wet eyes. As the actor found his voice again he said, “You may be asking yourself what the difference is between the way this man recited the Psalm, and the way I did it. I think I know the difference. I know the Psalm; he knows the Shepherd”.

Whether or not this reported incident actually occurred, it powerfully illustrates the secret Paul was talking about. My Christian sisters and brothers, when we are learning to know Him, it shows. That process brings to our lives a radiance and joy which there is no mistaking, and a power for which there is no substitute. Growing to know Christ is the all-encompassing and transforming process which results in a maturing Christian life, whether for the Apostle Paul, or for you, Christ’s 21st Century disciple.

The second of those inner changes which transforms the life of action focuses on the paradox of freedom. A friend who retired from the Army after a military career which has spanned thirty strenuous years of service, and three wars, insisted that for the first three months after retirement he was going to do nothing but sit on a big rocking chair on his front porch. Someone asked him what he was going to do after the three months were up. Replied he: “Start rocking”.

My friend’s tongue-in-cheek comment focuses a very important question: How free is free? Long before his three months was finished, he was doing much more than “just rocking”. Not only was inactivity exceedingly boring to him, it struck him as being very wrong.

“Freedom” to do absolutely nothing was not for him, freedom at all. It was actually be a kind of slavery. He realized that life imposes both responsibilities and limitations. But he also knew that they are responsibilities that refresh and limitations that liberate.

That’s the important truth Paul kept pointing out to the young churches when he referred to himself as a “slave” of Jesus Christ. That word, in Greek, indicates the most hopeless kind of servitude. Only death could break the relationship – either the death of the slave or the death of the master.

Why did Paul glory in being a slave? Because he discovered the paradox that only in being Christ’s slave can one become truly free. In the seventh chapter of Romans, Paul gave us that great treatise on freedom, insisting that he was powerless to do what he knew he should do. The only remedy to this problem he mentions in his letters is to become a slave of Christ. The paradox is that only in that kind of slavery can one find freedom to become what he knows he ought to be.

In a very real sense, freedom is the correct choice of that to which one will be enslaved. Everyone is enslaved to something. If we are not slaves of Christ, we will be slaves of sin says Paul. The choice is to decide which alternative we will accept – slavery to sin or slavery to Christ.

George Matheson’s luminous hymn points up that paradox about freedom:

Make me a captive, Lord, and then I shall be free;
Force me to render up my sword, and I shall victor be.
I sink in life’s alarms when by myself I stand;
Imprison me within Thine arms, and strong shall be my hand.

My will is not my own till Thou hast made it Thine;
If it would reach a monarch’s throne it must its crown resign;
It only stands unbent amid the clashing strife.
When on Thy bosom it has leant and found in Thee its life.

To be a slave for Christ is to recognize that there are limitations that liberate. There are many such limitations in life. For example, did you ever have a chance to suit up with one of those space suits the astronauts wear? In a very real sense the space suits limit them. But on the

other hand, they could not survive in space for a single second without them. Accepting the limitations imposed upon them by the cumbersome apparel make it possible not only to survive, but even to do astonishing tasks in the environment of space.

So what is a Christian? Not someone who has arrived at a state of perfection; but one who is on a journey that will one day lead there. A Christian is one who has come into a living relationship with Jesus Christ. And in that relationship he is coming better to know Christ and to find his liberation ever more complete as he discovers the paradoxical limitations of life that bring real freedom.

THAT'S WHAT IT MEANS TO BE HOLY! IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.