

Songs of Songs 2: 8-13

Psalm 45: 1-2, 7-10

Pentecost 15 2024

James 1: 17-27

St. Mark 7: 1-8, 14-15, 21-23

“Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders?”

Mark 7: 5

These days, if we use the word “Machiavellian” at all, it’s not a complement! It means getting our own way by being tricky, or by manipulating another person...

Niccolo Machiavelli wrote *The Prince* in the sixteenth century, in northern Italy. *The Prince* was an early book about politics. Like a lot of people in the late Middle Ages, Machiavelli clearly thought that “the end justifies the means.” He recommended, I recall, that rulers should be pretty ruthless, to keep their grip on power...

A number of years ago, a parish secretary gave me a book, written by 2 American pastors. I don’t remember the exact title, but it was something like, “How To Get Rid of Tradition In Your Church.” “How To Get Rid of Tradition In Your Church.” These pastors apparently felt that some people are stuck in their ways, and church pastors need to get *their own way*. The pastor need get rid of old customs, so the local church can attract new members... These pastors evidently felt so strongly that people who have been in the local church a long time are a problem, that these 2 pastors wrote a whole book about it!...

You probably guess that I disagree with the premise of this book...

Now, I figure that these 2 American pastors probably meant well, but their book was kind of Macchiavellian. I felt, when I read it, that the book was about manipulating people in the pews, and getting away with it...

I respectfully suggest that these pastors needed to think a little more about their book title, and what they are aiming to do, by writing their book.. I suspect these co-authors didn’t *really* want to get rid of Church tradition. Rather, they wanted to get rid of red tape, and clumsy rules in their church’s constitution!...

Many Christian churches, including Anglican Christians, believe that “tradition” can actually teach us wonderful and important things. The Bible itself speaks about “tradition” in both positive and negative ways. Maybe we need to be a little more careful about what we say about Christian “tradition...”

Why don’t we begin by looking at what the Bible says about “tradition” in a positive way?... First, let’s recall that before the Bible was written down, for generations it was passed down by oral family tradition...

Fathers and mothers were instructed to teach the faith of their forebears to their own children and their grandchildren. God speaks these words recorded in Deuteronomy 6:

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise.

The human authors of the Bible itself have been recognized by people of faith long ago to be inspired by God the Holy Spirit. The Bible both comes out of the work of the early Church, but is also the standard against which we measure the Church's faithfulness over the years...

The Lord Jesus himself quoted from the ancient scriptures, and understood them to be authoritative for his life, and for his followers. Here are a couple of examples: When Jesus himself was tempted, quoting from the ancient scriptures helped him resist temptation... Later, Jesus also said, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil (Matthew 5: 17)." Jesus Christ understood himself to be within a stream of tradition of faith, of which he is its fulfilment...

Even as the New Testament is being written, Christian leaders appealed to the apostolic tradition for the followers of Jesus to keep on track. They appealed to tradition within the New Testament... Addressing the false rumour that Jesus Christ had already come a second time, Paul writes,

As to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we beg you, brothers and sisters, not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either **by spirit or by word or by letter**, as though from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord is already here... So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and **hold fast to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by our letter**. (II Thessalonians 2: 1-2; 15)

Sacraments, like Baptism and Holy Communion, are faithful traditions in the Church which are handed on, in obedience to being followers of Jesus... So we can see plainly that "tradition" – meaning the norms of the followers of Jesus throughout the whole Church – is a good thing...

However, it is also true that sometimes we collectively get off track in our Church practices... There needs to be a course correction, like a pilot adjusting the rudder of the boat, so it sails directly to its destination.

The Old Testament prophets were infuriated with habits and customs among the people, which were disobedient to the Living God... To take just one of many examples, the prophet Malachi prophesies against the people because they were cheating on their offerings! Malachi also reassures the people that God blesses us, when we dare to trust him. God's standard is for people to give a tithe, a 10% offering of their resources, to do God's work:

Will anyone rob God? Yet you are robbing me! But you say, 'How are we robbing you?' In your tithes and offerings! You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me—the whole nation of you! Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing (3: 8-10).

Clearly, sometimes people got into habits and directions which were not God's best, and needed to change their habits...

Our supreme positive example is Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ hated legalistic rules, which were insensitive to people's needs. Jesus challenged the religious leaders who objected to Jesus healing the blind man on the Sabbath (John 9), or who objected to the apostles eating on the Sabbath (Mark 2)...

Let's also consider today's gospel reading, from Mark 7. We read that the apostles were eating food without going through the Jewish rituals of hand-washing.

[Jesus] said to them, 'Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written,

“This people honours me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me;
in vain do they worship me,
teaching human precepts as doctrines.”

You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.'

“[You are] thus making void the word of God through your tradition that you have handed on. And you do many things like this (vv. 6-7; 13)...”

I won't quote all the references to tradition, both positive and when needing correction, from the early Church. (There are too many of them.) Tradition is a stream within which we all swim. “Tradition” comes from the Latin *traditio*, “to hand on...” The image is like a relay race, when a runner passes on a baton to another runner to carry on...

Yet we also affirm freely that sometimes we get it wrong, and need to be corrected and re-oriented to the gospel itself!... For Anglican Christians and many others, the message of the Bible taken as a whole – the gospel -- is the standard to measure the Church's faithfulness...

The Anglican 39 Articles are often neglected these days, unfortunately... Read well, they provide guidelines to help us to be faithful. Anglican Christians have always had a certain humility about the Church. The Church in heaven will be perfect. The Church on earth... well – sometimes we get it wrong!...

Article 19: “The visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful [people]... [In ancient times] the Church of Jerusalem, Alexandria and Antioch have erred, so also [in] Rome.” Basically, the authors are saying that the Church can and does make mistakes everywhere, including (they hasten to say) in our own hearts, and in Anglican tradition. We need the corrective balm of the gospel in our lives...

Here's a way to think about it: Richard Hooker was an Anglican teacher, who lived and wrote about 400 years ago. Richard Hooker suggested we use 3 tests to see if we are being faithful. First comes the whole Bible. Second, he wrote, comes tradition, the wisdom of Christians through the ages. Third comes reason – common sense, or thoughtfully considering our experiences in life (that can teach us something too). It's not a three-legged stool for Richard Hooker, though (he's sometimes been misquoted). Scripture is the *first* test... But both tradition and reason also have vitally important roles...

Let's note that the Lord Jesus had some strong words to say about tradition which had gotten off-track, and was unfaithful, or insensitive to human needs. But let's also acknowledge that we have good news to pass on – salvation to be offered through Christ – like a runner passing on a baton. May we pass on the good news we have received, to our children or to others; now and for ever.

Amen.