

Lessons on Providence from an Apocalyptic Hippie

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St. Augustine's Episcopal Chapel

May 25, 2008

Living with Hard Texts

Living with the core texts at the heart of Christian life is rarely an easy proposition. The trouble comes not just from the verses we love to hate: Wives be submissive to your husbands, slaves be obedient to your masters. Surely these oldies but baddies can infuriate us, but we can think our way around them. We can use what is life-giving in scripture to refute or at least to properly contextualize such sayings. No, the real difficulty comes from those utterly demanding texts that stand at the very heart of Christian life, texts that we dare not dismiss with a cavalier Monty-Pythonesque proclamation, "It's not meant to be taken literally." This morning, it falls us to struggle with one of these genuinely hard-sayings. Let us listen again with open hearts and minds:

Jesus said, "No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth. "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."

Jesus the Apocalyptic Hippie

When I hear words like these, I must admit that my immediate reaction is dismissive. Just who does this Jesus think he is? Look at the birds of the air and consider the lilies of the field? Come on! Sober-minded folks like us hear these words as those of an unrealistic hippie, "Look at the birds, man. Consider the lilies of the field, dude. You see them working for the man?! You see them worrying about their 401K? No way, dude. So, chill man. Relax." I am reminded of Woody Allen's saying, "The lion and the lamb will lay down together but the lamb won't get much sleep."

But we also know that Jesus was not merely a laid-back hippie. In some sense, he thought the gig was up, that God's kingdom was coming and soon, that a new world was breaking in. He was a man of urgency and purpose who felt the last things were unfolding and being revealed in his own life and ministry. In other words, he was an

apocalyptic prophet. Go figure. An apocalyptic hippie! Now, if that phrase sounds somewhat oxymoronic to you, you are not wrong.

It is easy to see that on the face of it, the hippie and the apocalyptic have little in common. The apocalyptic is consumed by a sense of urgency driven by the conviction that the old order is passing away and that a new and radical future is bearing down on us. Jesus the hippie calls us to live in the fecund present.

On the Meaning of Providence

But however you read him, one thing is certain: Jesus is utterly convinced that all time—past, present and future—is in God’s hands. There is a heavy duty theological name for this conviction: providence. This morning we are offered a lesson on providence from an apocalyptic hippie.

We don’t tend to talk much these days about providence, unless we are flying Southwest into Rhode Island. Providence, as a theological notion, has meant a great many things. At an etymological level, the word refers to God’s power to see (*videre*) ahead into the future (*pro-*). Christians have traditionally confessed that God can see into the future by God’s foreknowledge and provide for us what we need even before we ask. So, providence is how Christians confess that we are in God’s care. In its most extensive meaning, providence is the name for God’s sovereign control over the world. In this broadest meaning, providence refers not only God’s capacity to foreknow but *to foreordain* all that happens in the world.

Those of you know who a little about the history of theology will know that the doctrine of providence was especially well-loved by John Calvin. Calvin found this doctrine deeply comforting because by it, believers can be confident that they are entirely in God’s governing care. For Calvin, to believe in providence is to trust that we are in the hands of an all-powerful and all-controlling God, not a God who created the world once upon a time only to leave the world running on autopilot.

Between Saying Too Much and Saying Too Little

While there is much that is life-giving and comforting about Calvin’s understanding of providence, there is also much that is deeply distressing. We need only to listen to Calvin in his own words to be convinced that he has said too much:

By an erroneous opinion prevailing in all ages, an opinion almost universally prevailing in our own day—viz. that all things happen fortuitously—the true doctrine of Providence has not only been obscured but almost buried. If one falls among robbers, or ravenous beasts; if a sudden gust of wind at sea causes shipwreck; if one is struck down by the fall of a house or a tree; if another, when wandering through desert paths, meets with deliverance; or, after being tossed by the waves, arrives in port, and makes some wondrous hairbreadth escape from death—all these occurrences, prosperous as well as adverse, carnal sense will attribute to fortune. But whoso has learned from the mouth of Christ that all the hairs of his head are numbered (Mat. 10:30), will look farther for the cause, and

hold that *all events whatsoever* are governed by the secret counsel of God. (Inst. I:XVI; 173; emphasis added)

In the events of just the last three weeks, we have reason enough to part ways with Calvin. When over a quarter of a million people are erased from the face of the earth by cyclone and earthquake, we are hard-pressed to confess that all events whatsoever are governed and ordered by the secret counsel of God. It is hard enough to say such things when we are confronted by the violence of nature, but it is harder still to say after the planned extermination of six million Jews that all events whatsoever are under God's control. It seems a cruel and overreaching faith that would have us believe in a God whose sovereign omnipotence permits such atrocities when he could have prevented them. Who can find comfort in such a fearsome God? His counsels are secret indeed.

But if Calvin's position says too much, we might well ask, what would it mean to say too little? What would we surrender if we give up on providence all together?

To give up on providence is to settle into a sense that the world is fundamentally a place of scarcity and lack. To give up on providence is to concede by default that the world is an arbitrary and violent place. When we give up on providence, we begin to suspect that we are left to our own devices in a dog eat dog world. It is but a short step from giving up on providence to a vision of society and nature as red in tooth and claw. The alternative to providence is a narrow "realism" that goes by the name of prudent self-interest.

Jesus bids us to choose between providence and what the world calls prudence. The prudent thing to do is to look after our own needs and interests because no one else will. A world without providence is random and insecure, a world that is untrustworthy. Should we acquiesce to such a vision of the world—and tragically we do all the time often out of fear and insecurity—we soon find ourselves captive in the service of wealth. Convinced that we cannot trust that this world is God's world, we seek to secure our own future against worry and anxiety. Finding that we cannot trust in God, we turn to a more reasonable master whose counsels seem sober, a master who cares little for the birds or for the lilies.

What We Need from a Doctrine of Providence

The stark alternative between divine providence and worldly prudence is real and absolute. Calvin is right; we cannot do without providence. We cannot live with a vision of the world as a mere crapshoot, a world in which might makes right and self-interest is the only game in town. Either we live out of a conviction that God will provide, or we live impoverished lives marked by anxious self-seeking. Either we look to the birds and consider the lilies, or we pass our days in claustrophobic anxiety. Either we learn to live or we scrape to survive. Either we learn to embrace each other in vulnerable trust, or we waste our days in futile pursuit of invulnerability. Either we go it alone or we embrace the fragile but priceless joy of community and communion. That is the choice that Jesus places us before us today. Trust and serve God or forget about trust and turn to wealth as your source of ultimate security.

Calvin made no mistake in confessing providence. He erred by imagining God as all-powerful super-being who orders and controls each and every event in the world,

large or small. Calvin's God looks too much like a worldly emperor who dictates all that happens in his domain. His is a god who looks more like Caesar than the Lord who hangs on the tree.

What we need from a doctrine of providence is confidence that, despite all appearances to the contrary, the earth is God's holy creation, created by a God who saw everything he made and saw that it was good. What we need from providence is the confidence to believe that the world in all its terrible beauty is not something from which we must escape but a garden that needs our tending. We need to trust in God's providence so that we might come to see the world as a sacred place of abundance and not an empty wilderness marked by scarcity and lack.

We need not believe that God's providence will make the world safe. There is nothing safe about life in general or life in Christ. Providence does not domesticate the world nor wish away the distorting power of malice and violence, whether that violence comes from human greed or nature's power. A doctrine of providence cannot insulate us from the fact that life is precarious. That would be wishful thinking not Biblical faith.

When we confess that we are in God's provident care we confess with Martin Luther King that the long arc of the universe may be slow to bend but it bends toward justice. When we put our trust in God's providence we affirm that love is more powerful and more fundamental than hate. To rely on God's providence is to trust that there is more strange power in one man turning the other cheek than in all the world's nuclear arsenals. To affirm providence is to trust that there is in one act of loving creativity more power than in all acts of destruction. When we place our trust in God's providence and confess that every hair on our head is numbered, we confess that God finds us lovely in our fragile and fleshly finitude. None of these affirmations makes life safe but they do make for a life worth living.

Confidence in Providence Found by Acting in Faith Not by Argument Alone

No theologian on earth or in heaven can persuade us by skillful argument to place our trust in God's providence. There are indeed arguments to be made; faith is not irrational even if it surpasses reason. But no argument, however brilliant, can convince us that we are in God's care. We are persuaded only when we are visited by divine grace. But we need not wait passively for such grace to announce itself to us in some far off future. Learning to walk in faith is like all bodily learning; there is no substitute for the doing. We will find the truth of Jesus' teaching only by daring to live into it. We cannot make ourselves believe in providence. Belief, after all, is a fickle and inconstant thing. Faith is found when we bet on providence by risking courageous and redemptive action and find to our surprise that we are sustained by what we cannot fathom.

As an occasional preacher and regular teacher of theology, I have long labored under the burden that I am called to greater faith and confidence than those whom I preach and teach. I can tell you that with every passing day in this community, I am being stripped of the illusion that I am literally called to be "holier than thou." Instead, God is leading me to trust in providence when I witness the power of God at work in the lives and deeds of this community. After all, ours is a community that knows how to look to the birds of the air and consider the lilies of the valley. Ours is a community that marches off to battle the violating power of genocide and rape by gathering thistles and lavender!

Either that is an act of sheer lunacy, or it is a sign of our radical trust in God's providential care. This is a community that sets out to combat poverty in Latin America by digging one well and opening up a school in a single village in Ecuador. The world may call it foolhardy. We call it faith. This community refuses to be defeated by the ravages of AIDS or hunger but persists in caring for the sick and feeding the hungry. Whether it is on Dickerson Road or in Rwanda or Botswana, this community does what it makes no earthly prudential sense to do: this tiny community in all kinds of ordinary and extraordinary ways offers itself up as a living sacrifice to God and in so doing demonstrates in deed not in word its reliance on God's providence.

Prudence calls us to hedge our bets; providence makes us a little reckless, albeit in the name of love.

We testify to God's providence when we confess that our willingness to embrace each other is enough, more than enough. We cast ourselves on God's providence when we confess that this little wafer and sip of wine is enough, indeed more than enough. We experience God's providence when we find our hearts moved to gratitude because we are given the opportunity to wipe away each other's tears. In and through all these risky deeds of mutual care, we confess with St. Paul "that we are persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:38-39). Trusting that God's love is stronger than the power of death is the real meaning of providence. Let us pray that God will deepen our capacity to trust in Her providence!