

Why Good Behavior Matters—From an Eschatological Perspective

The Second Sunday in Advent. Year A, RCL. 2 Peter 3:8-15a. December 4, 2011. The Shared Ministry of Our Saviour, Salem and Trinity, Alliance in the Diocese of Ohio. The Rev'd Jerome H. (Kip) Colegrove.

“(W)hat sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire? But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.” (2 Peter 3:11b-13)

Hooo-eee! Another one of those ferocious texts we get subjected to during Sunday worship in Advent, all about hanging in there till Jesus returns and renovates the universe! Powerful stuff. But it does leave a person wondering...

If God is going to fix everything, why do we have to do anything special?

That is a version of the deadliest of all questions: Why bother? This is the question that is part of the temptation either to sloth (an old-fashioned word for laziness) or to despair (which is composed of “Is that all there is to life?” and “Nothing I do—or we do—really matters”).

You can see why this is an issue for a religion that believes God will set everything to rights in the end, including healing human beings from the effects of evil—those effects being sin, death and bad stuff of all kinds. If *God* is going to do this, what’s left for *us* to manage? Or, more pointedly, why not just do as we please and let God sort it all out?

Now, if you want St. Paul’s answer to that, read First and Second Corinthians. That was the Corinthians’ problem. They thought they were home free; the grace of God through the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ fixed everything for all time and they were off the moral hook as far as their behavior went as long as they believed in Jesus’ saving activity through the Cross.

But Paul, along with the rest of the grand tradition of Christian faith and practice, says No, we are not off the hook; we still need to think, say and do righteous things. And the general, overall, comprehensive reason is this: We are stewards of this world, so what we do always matters. The action of any person, and especially any

Christian, should reflect the righteousness of God. There are four particular reasons for this that are prominent in Christian faith and practice.

First of all, *gratefulness*. We should act morally out of the gratitude, thankfulness, and sheer appreciation we feel for the love God has demonstrated by his willingness to be involved in the mess our free will has created in the midst of his good creation. God did not cause the mess, but his willingness to take effective action in response to it is our model for confronting the mess ourselves. Which is to say, one good reason to be good is to develop a closer relationship with the loving and righteous God—to return love for love—and thereby let love loose in the world.

In the second place, *witness*. The example of our good behavior is attractive to others who stand to benefit from forming their own relationship with God. This is good not only for them, but for the world in general, because—

The third reason to behave well is *participation* in God’s work for the healing of the world. God has always given human beings the dignity of being causes, to use a classic phrase.¹ What we do really matters. Indeed, if that were not so, our misbehavior would not have mattered in the first place. We are not robots, slaves, or puppets. Our will is free—as free as God’s will is, in principle, though constrained by the limitations of human perception, understanding, and power to act. And because the life and work of Christians is gathered into the life of Christ, our free choices can have an impact on the ultimate healing of creation. The good we do works toward this healing. The evil we do can not stop it, but, because God conserves good and adds to it, the good we do contributes to the good end, the wholeness and completeness, that God means all things to come to. This means that whatever we do either participates in the ultimate fixing of creation or comes to nothing.

The fourth reason to bother with the moral life is traditionally called *the salvation of our souls*. This has to do with that “coming to nothing” I just mentioned. The great tradition of Christian faith and practice insists that the quality of character we develop through our habit of good choices (or lack thereof) matters for our ultimate destiny. We cannot stop God’s intention to heal creation, but we can refuse to be part of it. Different strands of the Christian tradition vary in how they talk about the ultimate fate of individuals who decide not to bother with God, but...if God really does respect our dignity as causative agents in his creation, then, if we want to reject his stamp upon the whole thing, there will be some sort of diminished outcome for us. I myself don’t set much store by the usual depictions of hell. I’m more inclined to think that people who reject God will simply not notice the fullness of joy in the

¹ From Pascal.

renewed heaven and earth. They will become creatures no longer able to bear God's image. They will get what they asked for: existence without delight—without The Light, not suffering torture but forever being something other than fully human. God's glory and high purpose will still encompass them, since they will exist and existence has value in itself, but they will not know faith, hope and love in the sense we use those words now.²

At this point we are teetering on the edge of mystery: the origin and the end of all things in God. That is the theme of Advent, really. I consider Advent to be the most austere theological—and most disquieting—of all the seasons of the Church year. The Scripture readings swirl with catastrophe, hope, the need to hang on in faith, the need to resist discouragement. Christ is coming. The blessed birth, the return in glory—and the call to live lives worth of those things. That is what we celebrate on the doorstep between autumn and winter.

² I owe this view of the effect of rejecting God to various discussions of the subject, particularly N. T. Wright's *Surprised by Hope* and C. S. Lewis's comments on "souls" who "fail to make the grade." Lewis was talking about Limbo, which is rather what Wright's view of the state of the "unsaved" resembles, except that (like myself) Wright does not conceive of those souls being in a different "place" from the rest of the created order.