

We preach Christ crucified

I'm quoting regularly, these days, from the Christian philosopher—or philosopher, who happened to be a devout Christian, namely—Soren Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard believed that suffering for one's faith was a normal state of affairs for all who put their faith in Christ.

Now, what he had in mind, there, may have been suffering because of persecution from others. But I think that we can understand the concept of suffering for one's faith a little more broadly, to indicate the growth or development that God wishes us as people, a development that requires some painful adjustments, at times.

Now, the books of Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers of the Old Testament—especially Exodus and Numbers—tell us of the journey of the people of Israel in the desert of Sinai, and some of their responses to their situations. In Exodus, before the giving of the Ten Commandments, there is lots of complaining that goes on; but there is a forbearance, shall we say, on the part of God towards the people. However, after the giving of the law—the Ten Commandments, and all the other laws that were associated with the Ten Commandments—in the book of Numbers, there is again complaining; but this time, the forbearance on the part of God no longer seems to apply—except God does not decimate the people entirely.

There is a series of rebellions. And the rebellions I am going to list are not necessarily in chronological order, following the book of Numbers.

One of the rebellions is against Moses himself, Moses and Aaron. This one group feels that—“Here these people have usurped the leadership of God's people... and why should they have all the glory and acclaim; why should they be in positions of leadership?” Well, those people find a rather terrible fate, those people who rebel against Moses and Aaron.

And, subsequently, on in the book of Numbers, we hear that the people actually became involved in a form of idolatry with the people [of the area] as they approached the promised land.

These people had, over this time in the wilderness—they had to come to the understanding that only God was to be worshipped—the Lord who brought them out of the land of Egypt. And their obedience would show itself by responding to those whom God had called—particularly, in this case, Moses and Aaron—rather than going out on their own, and deciding that their leadership was as good as Moses' and Aaron's.

Well, that was one rebellion. But another rebellion was the repeated desire to return to Egypt, where they, at least, had leeks, other choice elements, for their food, and didn't have to put up with mere manna, which was getting rather tiresome, having eaten that for a period of time. Perhaps, it's a bit like eating porridge for breakfast, lunch and supper, repeatedly, over and over again, without sugar, without salt—a pretty unexciting meal. (However, the people, as we hear in Exodus [or Numbers?], did find ways of cooking this manna, and preparing it in a variety of ways.)

They complained about leaving the land of Egypt. Also, those same people settled on certain leaders who would spy out the promised land that they were to go to. And a number of these leaders returned, giving a rather negative estimate of the land into which God was calling his people. It was a fine land; but there were all these people settled there; they were giants, and living in well-fortified towns, and the like. And so, the people were afraid.

Well, in this period of the wilderness, these Israelites not only had to learn that only the LORD was to be their God. They had also had to learn that they had a past—namely, God’s grace, God’s deliverance of them in Egypt—that they could remember, and hold on to. And they also had a future that God had promised them; and they could also hold on to that as something real and genuine for themselves. So, rather than giving in to complaint and fear, they could people with a memory and also a hope.

Now, these Israelites in the desert—as I mentioned, they got fed up with their conditions, and they—wanted some meat. This is recorded in the book of Numbers. They wanted some meat. Well, the LORD sent them some quail; and they satisfied their hunger for this meat. But, at the same time—remember this is Numbers, not Exodus—there was no forbearance for these people. Many of them died at that point.

So, these people, living in this period of the wilderness—they had to learn to put aside, to some degree, their desires, and live with their God’s care of them; to learn that they did not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeded from the mouth of God, as the book of Deuteronomy tells us.

So all this period in the wilderness was a period— it was a hardship; it was a time of difficulty. But it was a time also where this people was being formed into the people of Israel— learning that only the LORD was God, and to put away all false gods, to respond to the ones whom God had set in authority, like Moses and Aaron. During this period, they learned to remember and also have a hope for the future, and to put aside mere desire, with the realization that God’s grace, God’s word, God’s presence, would sustain them in the present time.

So, suffering is an essential component, according to Kierkegaard, of holding to faith. And you can see this in the journey of the people of Israel through the desert. It’s a period of formation; and it’s not an easy experience.

Now, I read to you, a little bit earlier, from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. And these people, too—early Christians—had to find what it meant to be a Christian. They had no role-models, other than Paul and Silas, perhaps. And so they had to learn what it was to be a Christian.

Here, they were given this new wisdom. And, sometimes, they focussed on their wisdom rather than on worship of God, who had come to them in a very unusual way, a unique way— namely, through Jesus Christ, who was crucified for them.

These people also had to learn to have a memory—not to be complaining or fearful, but rather, base their lives on what God had done for them in Christ, and have hope for the future that God had also provided for them.

And these people, as the apostle Paul told them, were—as he proclaimed to them—“All things are yours, and you are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s.” In that God has made us his own, this is our Father’s world. So, in a way, all things are ours; and, on the basis of that, we are people not dominated by desire for things, but, rather, are people who are called to share what we have with others.

Now, these characteristics of how God is forming people into being his own people, show up also, I think, in the Ten Commandments, and what they have to say.

The Ten Commandments, of course, begin with an emphasis on God, and of how worship is to be of God alone—"I am the LORD who brought you out of the land of slavery, bondage, out of the land of Egypt; you shall have no other gods before me." Rule number one. "You shall make no idol..." Rule number two. "And you shall not make wrongful use of my name."

There is nothing dated about those commandments. Those commandments remain in effect for us. And they tell us that, throughout our lives, we are to seek to serve the one Master, who is the LORD, who has made himself known in Jesus Christ. And that will require, again and again, an experience of being humbled as we put aside certain other loyalties, other masters, which dominate our lives. "You shall have no other gods before me.." as the LORD said.

Now, in the Ten Commandments, the two commandments which follow have a more positive reference—that is, observing the Sabbath day, to keep it holy, and honouring father and mother.

Now, what do we do? Of course, the Sabbath day—we do observe *the Lord's day*. And one of the ways in which we observe it is by making worship a part of that Lord's day. No doubt, each one of us has our own particular way in which we observe this Lord's day. But, surely one way in which we observe it is to remember again who we are—people called into faith in Christ, and therefore made God's own. And also, on this Sabbath day [or Lord's day], when we focus on what God has done for us, we also focus on the future, the hope, that God has prepared for us, through Jesus Christ, who was crucified, but now is risen.

Now, there are a great number of things which take us away from this focus. Society, in the present time, as maybe societies immemorial, not only believe that there are many gods out there, and don't focus just on one; but the society also tells us, "Focus in on the present, and do not remember the great plan in which you are part; stay in the present, and don't worry about the future, the great plan of God for us in the future, through Jesus Christ."

But worship, keeping the Lord's Day holy, helps us to re-focus our lives, re-connect them, so that we see the rest of our lives in terms of what God has done for us, and what God's promise is for us. And so we cease to be complaining and fearful people; but we live out of the reality of God—the memory and hope he gives to us.

Now, the last five commandments are all in the negative. "You shall not kill or murder." "You shall not commit adultery." "You shall not steal." "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour." And "you shall not covet what is your neighbour's, your neighbour's house, wife, etc."

Now, why all those various commandments? Are people highly motivated to kill other people? Are they motivated to commit adultery with another person's spouse? Are they motivated to steal? Are they motivated to lie under oath, or even, in the absence of oath, testifying about the truthfulness of some situation, [falsely]?

Well, the background of these various commandments comes out in the very last commandment—"You shall not covet your neighbour's house, wife, and so on." Desire is a powerful thing. And desire can cause people to murder. Desire can cause people to commit adultery. Desire can cause people to steal. Desire can cause people to testify falsely. But these commandments put a stop, a boundary, to desire. And they say, desire has its limits; and it cannot go any further. It cannot lead to killing, committing adultery, stealing, bearing false witness.

Well, in light of our faith in Christ, who has blessed us, joining us to himself, we live our lives, not with this force of desire which wants everything for ourselves. But, rather, we are freed from that power, and are given, instead, an ability to share with one another, share with our neighbour.

But all of this is a difficult process—serving God alone who has made himself known in Christ, not being complaining or fearful people, not having desire as the ultimate motivating power in our lives. All of that—to make a change in that is a difficult process. It involves suffering, being humbled by God, involves learning patience, and, therefore, compassion with others.

Kierkegaard said that suffering for one's faith is normal. There is nothing abnormal about that situation. And, indeed, in light of the description of God's people through Exodus and Numbers, and even as described in the Ten Commandments, we believe that we do not automatically obey these commands; God makes us, and is making us, into his people. And may he indeed accomplish and be successful in doing just that—in making us his people, through Jesus Christ our Lord, into faith in whom he has called us.