

Look Again

(The Corinthian Double-Take)

II. Cor. 5:20-6:2. (Second Lesson for Ash Wednesday)

[Initial Diagnosis] My lifestyle – it bothers you, doesn't it? That in effect is what Paul is saying to his Christian critics in Corinth. It disturbs you to be served by someone like me, Paul, a perennial loser, an apparent masochist who seems to enjoy sticking his neck out only to get it chopped off again and again. You complain, you Corinthians, that although I may write powerful and strongly-worded letters, still when I am with you my appearance is unimpressive and my speech unconvincing (10:10). Yet perversely I keep coming back for more. People like me come across, don't we, as chronic, tragedy-prone fall-guys. "...We are flogged, sent to prison, mobbed; toiling, sleepless, starving; ...taken for impostors..., obscure...; said to be dying; ...rumored to be executed...; thought most miserable...; taken for paupers..., people having nothing... (6:5-10).

You are right, "I have been sent to prison more often [than those flashy apostles have], and whipped so many times more, often almost to death. Five times I had the thirty-nine lashes from the Jews; three times I have been beaten with sticks; once I was stoned; three times I have been shipwrecked and once adrift in the open sea for a night and a day. Constantly traveling, I have been in danger from rivers and in danger from brigands, in danger from my own people and in danger from pagans; in danger in the towns, in danger in the open country, danger at sea and danger from the so-called brothers."

(11:23-26) But the thing about this lifestyle of mine that irks you most, isn't it, is that I defend it and even boast of it? What you are thinking is: "Lifestyle, my eye – that is more like a style of dying and death!" And that, you find offensive, that scary smell of death about me. It is as if your mate came home one day with terminal cancer or raped and then, to make matters worse, affirmed that as a normal state of affairs. How sick, say you.

[Advanced Diagnosis] The truth is, you are objecting not merely to me, Paul, and to my style of operation. No, it is far worse than that, even though you may imagine that that is the extent of your objection. What you are objecting to really is God, to his style of operation. You are offended at the way he operates the world, a world in which people (at least some people) are constantly losing, – "flogged, mobbed, toiling, starving, obscure, dying, miserable, paupers." You resent that about God, who runs that kind of world. Or rather you prefer to imagine that that kind of world could hardly be God's doing. It is bad enough, you think, that the world is like that at all without, in addition, having someone like me come along, an apostle, a spokesperson for God, who seems almost to go out of his way to ask for the world's beatings. For when I seem to invite that sort of beating, then I give the impression that such treatment comes from God. And that strikes you as a misrepresentation of God. When I keep on incurring criticism and put-downs and closed doors and seem even to accept all that as par for the course, then I give the impression that God personally allows much of the world's suffering – and worse, the world's sin. Which, in a way, God does.

But if so, you protest, how can God be righteous? What kind of righteousness is that for any proper God to have? How, you say, could we ever reconcile a God who is righteous with this sort of world? No, you say piously, God is not to be joined with this

world at all. So you concoct your own little way of harmonizing, of squaring, of reconciling a world of sin with a God who is righteous. How do you do that? By postponement, delay, mañana. Someday, you say, God will get it all together – in the sweet bye-and-bye. That is how you try to get God off the hook and save God's face. And why do you do that? Because otherwise God offends you.

[Final Diagnosis] I have news for you, Corinthians – bad news. It-is not you or I who need to reconcile God or God's goodness with the world's evil. It isn't for us to do the reconciling. It is for us to be reconciled. We are the world's sin. The question is, how to square that – us! – with God? Stop your blasted theodicies. It isn't God who needs to be gotten off the hook, either in the future or any other time. It is you and all the rest of us. And if you wait till the end, till that sweet bye-and-bye, then you will have waited too long. You don't like it when I say (5:6, 7): "to live in the body means to be exiled from the Lord." For that only calls attention, doesn't it, to how alienated from God we all still are, how far from home?

[Preliminary Prognosis] I have news for you Corinthians. Did I say bad news? Wait till you hear the good news. Remember those things about me which disturb you so, my floggings, my starvings, my offensive appearance, my track record of losing; my weakness? Remember how they seem to be only my floggings, my being put down? Look again – still at me, but this time, at me through the prism of the cross. (†) Now whose floggings are they? I mean my floggings; but whose are they really? Right! Isn't that good news? Notice, for that sort of good news you don't have to close your eyes to the world or to people like me or to the present, you don't have to look away toward some world beyond, some sweet bye-and-bye, toward some God-off-the-hook. In fact, it is important that you do see me, poor old Paul, warts and all, because it is my losses, my suffering, my sin precisely

which our Lord is bearing – not his own, mine.

[Advanced Prognosis] And look again. Just because it is he who is my Crucifer, who is doing this dying of mine with me, don't you see how he is also doing something else besides? Do you need a clue? What was it he did "on the third day"? Right! And now, looking back at me, please, looking at me Christianly, don't you see that going on in my life, too: not just dying but rising – his rising? "We are in difficulties on all sides, but never cornered; we see no answer to our problems, but never despair; we have been persecuted, but never deserted; knocked down, but never killed." (4:8-9) ...Obscure yet famous; said to be dying and here we are alive; ...thought most miserable and yet we are always rejoicing; taken for paupers though we make others rich, penniless yet we own the world." (6:9-10) Do you see how, despite my losing, I am still around, I am back the next morning, not giving up? Now you don't seriously believe, do you, that that's merely the result of a good night's sleep, just an ordinary, garden-variety snapping-back, nothing more than my (little old Paul's) hanging in there? Oh no. How did I put it in 4:10: "Wherever we go we carry death with us in our body, the death that Jesus died, that in this body also life may reveal itself, the life that Jesus lives. For continually, while still alive, we are being surrendered into the hands of death, for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be revealed in this mortal body of ours." Isn't that neat?

But there is still that little problem of theodicy, the problem of evil: how to reconcile divine righteousness with human evil? I'll handle that, says God, my own way. Just stand aside, please, and watch how it's done. So you want to see me be righteous, God says. Then look right smack dab at the world. Meet me at Jesus. Meet me at his cross. And watch me, from then on, doing his crucifying and his resurrecting over again, over and over, in the lives – the deaths and. the lives – daily and

hourly of his followers in their weekday, garden-variety, hum-drum floggings and starvings and losings and in their snapping back. There, in them, you will find me being righteous.

[Final Prognosis] That is what Paul means when he says, “we are the righteousness of God in Christ,” and “Christ was made sin for us.” We are God-being-righteous. Does that sound theologically dangerous? Does that out-process process theology, to say that our very lives are the processing-out of God’s righteousness, and we ourselves are attributes of the deity – not just righteous, but God’s very own righteousness? As God is destroying us, in Christ, God is righteously clearing away the rubble and sin of the world. As God raises us back up, each day and hour over again, God is righteously replacing an old world with a brand new one. And all this, not first someday in the distant bye-and-bye, but now. “Now” is the day for being saved, now is when God is reconciling the world to God’s self, and right in the middle of our own little lives.

No wonder Paul can say that he does not look at anybody anymore the way he used to, from merely a human standpoint, but now he looks at everyone (at least in hope) as the place where new creation is happening and old things are passing away. And so it is with us, sisters and brothers. Even when we look most like losers to one another, might we not still – mightn’t we then more than ever – be pantomiming him whose dying and rising again our lives really are?

Robert W. Bertram

Seminex Chapel Service

9 February 1978 (Slightly revised 5/14/96)