

Conscience

Text: St. Matthew 22:34-40

According to the first psalm, which we sang a few moments ago, the righteous are ‘like trees planted by water-streams with leaves that never wither. In all that they do, they prosper.’ Because we live in an area of plentiful water, where trees grow just about anywhere, the psalmist’s image may not strike us very forcefully at first. But if you have ever been in a desert area, such as the one that the psalmist lived in or, perhaps, the American Southwest, an area very similar to the Holy Land, the image is both forceful and striking, indeed. For in such desert areas one can stand under a huge sky where the horizon is broken only by barren rock mountains, and where the desert floor is covered only with sparse vegetation: a few tumbleweeds, some scrub brush , a few gnarled dwarf trees, an occasional reptile or jackrabbit. While that is a starkly beautiful sight, it is also very harsh and unwelcoming one, one that hardly promises hospitality for human bodies and souls.

However, in such places if one scans the area, particularly from a higher vantage point, one is sometimes struck by a mysterious long row of green. That green signals the presence of large, broad-leafed trees. Their presence, in turn, signals the presence of a river or stream flowing through their midst. For, in an area of little or no rain, it is only on the banks of an ever-flowing stream that such large and lush trees can grow whereas only a few feet away from the stream, the vegetation returns to the sort that can live in a desert with little water.

The image of trees is therefore a striking image. But it is one that cuts two ways. On the one hand, it is a positive image, extolling the flourishing life of the righteous. They *are* like trees planted by water-streams, for they prosper and grow in the best sense. They add life to the landscape. The righteous do add life to our moral landscapes. On the other hand, though, the

image is a little harsher than that, for it presupposes a moral landscape that is not otherwise lush, a landscape where righteousness and the fullness of life that it brings are unusual and all the more striking for their rarity. Thus the image present us at one and the same time with what we would like life to be like, and with it is too often like.

As striking as the image of such moral landscapes is, the psalmist, however, is not trying to present that image to us only. He is also intent on telling *why* the righteous do flourish. It is simply because, he says, “their delight is in the Law of the Lord, and on his Law they meditate day and night.” Now, lest one assume that it is rabbinical scholars alone who are righteous, let us hasten to put this another way, one that we are more used to. It is this: what makes the righteous, righteous, very simply is a conscience, and it is conscience that makes them flourish. For what is conscience but knowledge of what is right and wrong, and what is righteousness but delight in having and meditating on that knowledge?

Now, to put it that way helps us to understand a number of things about the moral landscapes in which we live. It says, for example, something about what sort of problem it is that we face when it seems that the moral landscape is not lush, but either barren or foliated only by sparse brush and dwarf trees. For that barrenness that we all too often encounter is a barrenness of conscience.

Not that one very often meets people with no conscience at all. Those sort of people are actually rarely encountered. But if one rarely meets people with no conscience one does meet frequently people who have uneasy or guilty consciences. These are people who have some sense of what is right and what is wrong; indeed, they may often have a very accurate sense of what is right and wrong. But for them right and wrong is simply a fact, a commandment perhaps, pretty much divorced from life and people as they know them, something to be tucked away and

consulted only on certain ceremonial occasions. These are people who take no delight in meditating on right and wrong, no delight in God's Law, and who derive no life from that knowledge. They have consciences of a sort; they derive little of their lives from them. They know the dictates of conscience; they don't think them as their own.

On occasion, though, they are confronted by the demands of right and wrong which they themselves know. They have to think them. But having ignored those demands for the most part and for so long, that confrontation only produces guilt. It does not produce a fruitful tree or a lush moral landscape. It does produce the barrenness of guilt and resentment.

Consider this story of a guilty conscience. It is a story recounted by a retired pastor.

"It was in the 1930s. The Great Depression was under way. You could buy a pair of overalls for 50¢, but what I needed was 75¢. Yes, 75¢ and I wanted to spend it on a Shimmy Wiggler. My mother, possibly believing I had become enamored of an Egyptian belly dancer, wasn't enthusiastic about obliging me. Even when I explained that it was a fantastic fishing bait and that all my friends had one, she was unmoved.

"Do you know how long your father has to work to earn 75¢? Do you know how many pounds of hamburger meat that will buy?" No, I didn't know and I didn't care. What I needed to deceive the bass at Jeem's Bayou was a Shimmy Wiggler.

"There may have been other things for which I cried, but I cannot remember them now. For that buck-tailed-covered hook attached to a nickel-plated spinner, I cried. I must have been twelve years old at the time, but cry I did.

"I got that wonderful fishing lure. Three quarters of an ounce it weighed and I marveled at its beauty. But weighed far more when the ton of guilt associated with acquiring it was included. It never did cast as smoothly as I thought it would. Did you ever try to cast seven and a half

pounds of hamburger meat or an hour of your father's toil? Even the fish that were supposed to find it irresistible – according to *Field and Stream* – stayed clear.

“Thus I learned at a relatively early age that a little bit of guilt could weigh an awful lot. It can be as heavy as lead in the pit of the soul.”

That is the story of a child. But it is a story repeated regularly by adults, too, although often at far more significant levels. And in each case when one has a guilty conscience like that, one frequently tries to assuage it somehow. But far too often when one tries to salve a conscience that is feeling guilty – the guiltiness, say, that comes from one's racial prejudice being exposed, or from some act of violence or callousness towards somebody one loves – spiritual trees don't suddenly spring up and flourish as if planted by a river. How often do they ever spring up when we are simply trying to repair damage done because *we* feel guilty? Not often. How often does a new and deeper understanding of the Law that says that we should love our neighbor, a fruitful understanding of the Law, spring up in our hearts when we are simply trying to avoid feeling guilty? Rarely. Are the reconciling gestures that we attempt even made from such an understanding? Hardly.

All this is because easing a guilty conscience and delighting in the Law of the Lord so that one is like a tree planted by a river are two very different things. And that no fruit is borne out of guilty gestures, except perhaps resentment, which is what guilt turns into when it is not relieved, indicates pretty clearly which of the two is operating in that case. These are cases where people have *heard* about right and wrong, but have not meditated sufficiently upon it nor taken it to heart. That can only produce a guilty conscience, and, in turn, a fruitless and barren moral landscape. For no one really benefits from guilt and resentment.

Well, what then does one do about a guilty conscience? How does one have a life of

flourishing? We could deny that there is anything to be guilty about. Suggested by Freud and other modern therapists, this may cure us of *feeling* guilty. It does not make the barren land fruitful as should be evident from just looking around us. To do that something else is needed.

What is needed can be seen if we look at the problem of conscience another way. As one grows older one occasionally hears complaints of people – usually pretty good people – that they no longer have any sense of God in their lives. They have no sense of his presence, just a sense, perhaps, of a set of rules that weigh heavily upon them. As a result, they claim, they often feel like they are just going through the motions of faith. They often have guilty consciences about that fact, too.

What do they need? To have a more complete knowledge of right and wrong? It is not likely for most already have a very good sense of what is right and what is wrong. That is precisely what is making them feel guilty. What they lack – and hence what they need – is a sense that it makes any difference. What they – what we lack is a sense that knowing good and evil is a matter of life itself. What they lack is a sense of the one who gives the Law. To regain *that* sense is to regain the sense of God's presence.

In the nineteenth century the great English theologian, John Henry Newman, suggested that the key to faith is moral conscience. His reasons for so claiming and his argument are not always easy to follow. At times, it seems that he is suggesting that the key to faith is to be checking constantly one's one self for having violated the moral law, and if that is what he meant then the key to faith is guilt. But I don't think that is what he meant. What I do think he meant is something like this: that conscience is faith in God when our acts of conscience are acts of seeing and acting in the way that God sees and acts. That is to say, conscience is faith in God when right and wrong are no longer mere abstractions but the very way we see life itself. Conscience is the

feeling of the presence of God when we see not only that there is a right and wrong, but also that it is a matter of life itself that we choose the right. It is to see that the world needs our righteousness and to see that we ought to give it.

St. Augustine wrote: “The one who knows righteousness perfectly and loves it perfectly is the righteous man.” That is to say, that there is no difference between knowing what is good and doing it for such a person. There is no break or hesitation between knowing and doing. Thus to have such a knowledge of God and of good is to have a sense that what we do makes a difference. Conscience in this sense is not just knowing the rules, and then maybe following them or not; it is the ability to look at each being in our lives and to want to give them what is right and to do our best to give it, even if it is just our adoration and love. This sort of conscience is all these things – knowing, wanting, doing – without break.

To have conscience like that is to have life and to feel God’s presence. It is to feel God’s forgiveness for a guilty conscience, too. Let me illustrate how.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is the story of a sailor who one day kills an albatross for the mere fun of it. And it was mere fun since one can neither eat albatross nor use it for any other purpose. The bird rather uselessly decorates the sky and sea. Now, as a result of that senseless killing the ship on which the mariner is sailing is becalmed in the middle of the ocean. The other sailors justly blame him for having caused their misfortune. As punishment they force him to wear the rotting, stinking dead albatross around his neck to serve as a lesson. But there is a sense in which this is no lesson at all. For the mariner had the sort of conscience that can be guilty; he knew the difference between right and wrong, and he was perhaps guilty over what was surely a malicious act. That is, he regretted the pass to which it had brought him. But that sort of conscience does not heal and make things right. It does not make

life flourish.

The type of conscience that does make life flourish is the kind that the mariner learned later when in the midst of his calamity he one day looked over the side of the ship and saw the sea teeming with all sorts of fish and creatures of the deep that are of no particular worth to human beings. But this time instead of seeing what is worthless the thought was suddenly borne in on the mariner that here was life, life that may have no commercial value to humans but that had value nevertheless, purely and simply in and by itself. This was life that was created and loved by God.

It is that sort of thought that claimed the attention of the mariner that I am calling conscience. That is the sort of conscience that is the felt daily presence of God in our lives. For as the mariner says very simply at the end of the poem:

He prayeth best who loveth best

All thing great and small.

For the dear Lord who loveth us,

He made and loveth all.

It is that sort of conscience that can never be guilty and that sort of conscience that makes the deserts bloom. This is what the *Letter to the Hebrews* offers when it says, our loving Lord “through the eternal Spirit, offered himself without blemish to God, [to] purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living god!” For to have a conscience, purified from dead works, that now can worship the living God really is what it means to meditate daily upon the Law of the Lord, the law that is fulfilled in these two commandments: “to love the Lord your God with all of your heart and mind and soul and to love your neighbor as yourself.”