

Jesus + Anything= | Anything + Jesus=

'But even if we or an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed!' Gal 1:8

Today's reading from the letter of Paul to the Galatians is not a feel good Bible verse quoted a lot for motivational speeches or weddings. I won't be reading it at Hagop and Angie's wedding later today, and you won't be seeing it cross-stitched on any pillow or t-shirt any time soon. Yet the verse I began with and today's entire reading from chapter 2 of Galatians, can be summarized into two short formulas which are key to a life well lived: Jesus + Anything=Joy, but Anything + a little Jesus=Sorrow. If Christ is first for us, sure add whatever you want to it, you should be ok because Christ is first. However, start with anything else-your success, the approval of your parents, your ethnic pride-and try to fit Christ into it, and you and I will find the formula for failure.

The verse I began with gives a concise summary of today's longer reading and these formula for happiness, let me read it again. 'But even if we or an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed!' The Apostle Paul is insisting that the Gospel of Christ is one, and it alone is sufficient to make us happy. Paul then goes on to illustrate how this was true in key moments in his life of ministry and the life of the early church. He writes that after almost twenty years of preaching and teaching about our Risen Lord, he traveled up to Jerusalem to meet with the rest of Jesus' Apostles, the center of the forming Christian church. Then-just like today-the church was facing division and discord over battles of which flavor of Christianity was correct. Paul's answer is that Jesus first plus any flavor is delicious. But any flavor of anything + Jesus is unacceptable. Jesus + Jewish culture is great, but Jewish culture with a side of Jesus is a problem. Jesus + Greek culture is great, but Greek culture with a little Jesus is a problem. By extension of course Jesus + Armenian culture is great on this weekend of the feast of the Holy Translators, but Armenian culture with a little Jesus is a problem. And we all suffer from this problem, this sin which is as subtle as the serpent, which reverses our priorities, which insists on making and serving our own gods rather than serve almighty God. And it's not just ethnicity + Jesus that gets us into trouble, it's I want to be successful and a little Jesus, I want people to notice me + Jesus; whatever we raise to be equal to God becomes our false God.

And one of the reasons this subtle switch is so easy to do and easy to miss is because Greekness, Armenianness, success, reputation, are not bad things, they are good things, but even good things, especially good things, when put in God's place, become corrupted. I wonder if maybe the world church over the centuries have spent too much time trying to save us from our obvious sins, and too little time trying to save us from all of our good aims, good gifts and good deeds. We need saving from our good aims, gifts and deeds because we can too easily be tricked into thinking that these goods are as good as it gets. We can too easily become self-satisfied, instead of hungry for God and good. We can too easily settle for an uneasy comfort instead of a harder won but lasting peace.

A famous British preacher of the American great awakening named George Whitefield outlined the problem in one of his sermons in a very powerful way:

'Before you can seek peace in your heart, you must not only be made sick of your original and actual sin, but you must be made sick of your righteousness, of all your duties and performances. There must be a deep conviction before you can be brought out of your self-righteousness; it is the last idol taken out of our heart. The pride of our heart will not let us submit to the righteousness of Jesus Christ... You may be saying to yourselves now, Well, I believe all this. But remember there is a great difference between talking and feeling. Did you ever feel a deep need for your Redeemer? Did you ever feel the deep need of Jesus Christ, when facing the deficiency of your own righteousness? And can you now

say from your heart, Lord, the best duties that I ever performed are of nothing? If you are not brought out of yourself in this way, you may seek peace for yourselves, but yet you will find no peace.'

But yet we can find peace in placing Christ first, in practicing the discipline and retaining the conviction of so many of the great cloud of witnesses to Christ through the ages. We can say defiantly with Yeznik Koghbatsi on this feast of the holy translators that 'there is no power on earth which can force us to change our religion because our covenant is not with man but with the Almighty God.' And we can echo one final time the words of St. Paul that 'even if an angel from heaven should proclaim to us a gospel contrary to what has been proclaimed, let that one be accursed!' For Jesus first + anything at all = great joy, whereas anything at all with a little Jesus=great sorrow, now and always and unto the ages of ages; amen.