

Twenty-First Weekend After Pentecost (B/RCL)
Hebrews 4:12-16; Mark 10:17-31
October 13-14, 2018
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

We hear Notre Dame [American pronunciation] and we probably think of the university near South Bend, Indiana. We hear Notre Dame [French pronunciation] and we probably think of the cathedral in Paris. But there are **many** *eglises de Notre Dame*, churches of Our Lady, in France. Along with the French flag, with its vertical bands of blue, white and red, and Marianne, the female figure holding that flag who embodied the French Revolution, the fleur de lis, the stylized lily, is one of the most familiar symbols of France. It represents the lily that the Archangel Gabriel often holds in artwork of the Annunciation, Gabriel's visit to the virgin Mary, announcing the upcoming birth of the little Lord Jesus.

Pastor Mark & I briefly visited Notre Dame in Paris last month, but we spent much more time in Notre Dame de Chartres, another glorious cathedral, visible from miles away across the wheat fields of the Loire Valley, and distinctive with two very different towers, an older Romanesque and a newer Gothic. We began our time in France with a one day retreat, "Meeting Mary in Chartres." We gravitated there because of the labyrinth (which I'll tell you more about another time) and also because I have a special interest in and curiosity about Mary, since my baptismal name **is** Mary Virginia, after all.

I'd been to Chartres when I was in college and remembered seeing a relic that many believe is a remnant of the veil worn by Mary when she gave birth to Jesus. I was skeptical, even back then. This time 'round I decided to be open to learning what that kind of piety is all about, and simply appreciating the people's faith.

The faithful of Chartres associate that veil (which has been carbon-dated back to the 1st century and to that region of the world) with Mary's protection of them, her cathedral, their city. The grandson of Charlemagne gave the veil to the cathedral in 876. It's been there over a thousand years and has survived multiple fires and the French Revolution. It is much smaller than it used to be. The revolutionaries cut some of it into bits and publicly burned it outside the cathedral. The refrain we kept hearing was, "**Mary comes when called, and comes quickly.**" The people credit her with protecting the cathedral from destruction by the Allied bombs that damaged or ruined so many other churches in that corner of France, prior to and after the D Day landings. Another much younger member of our group, a French woman, named Claire, spoke of being raised without any religion or any knowledge of Christianity. She now feels a beautiful and strong connection to "Mother Mary" as she calls her. Mark & I were left hoping and trusting that she will also come to know and love Mary's Son, our Lord Jesus....

Devotion to Mary became widespread in the Middle Ages-and-later for more than one reason, but partly because Christians found **Jesus** way too scary to approach. In cathedrals the West Portal (door) and the sculptures and stained glass around and over it always depict the Last Judgment. One image we saw was Jesus seated on His throne, with the devil and the Archangel Michael standing beneath Him holding a scale on which they weigh the people who have died, determining whether they are going to happily join the procession to heaven on the Lord's right (like the sheep in the parable of the sheep and goats) or miserably become part of the chain gang on the Lord's left, headed to hell and already being tormented, poked, pushed and prodded by demons. Jesus is the Judge and we will all come under judgment. Most folks have usually realized the truth of St. Paul's observation: "We have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God."

(Romans 3:23)

In today's Gospel Jesus basically agrees when He says,

"Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." [The disciples] were greatly astounded and said to one another, "Then who can be saved?" (Mark 10:24c-26)

The passage from Hebrews, our 2nd lesson this weekend, piles on too when it says:

...before [God] no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account. (Hebrews 4:13)

It's a scary image. What's translated "laid bare" is literally "with neck extended," like someone's head on the chopping block – or the guillotine. God sees everything we do, reads our every thought, is well aware of our intentions, good or bad. In our less-than-saintly moments we might be able to fool our parents, teachers, coaches, employers, spouses, or Uncle Sam, but we're not fooling God. Again Jesus says:

*"Do you have any idea how difficult it is for people who 'have it all' to enter God's kingdom?... You can't imagine how difficult..." **That** set the disciples back on their heels. "Then who has any chance at all?" they asked.*

Jesus was blunt: "No chance at all if you think you can pull it off by yourself. Every chance in the world if you let God do it." (Mark 10:23-24, 26-27, The Message)

"Then who has any chance at all?" "No one without the grace of God."¹

When the cathedrals were being built, the answer to "Who can be saved?", "Who has any chance at all?" was often "those who appeal to the Mother of God!" We find a different answer in the Gospels and in Hebrews: "Who can be saved?", "Who has any chance at all?" Those who turn in trust to God and cling to God's Son. Here's a paraphrase from *The Message*:

Now that we know what we have – Jesus, this great high priest with ready access to God – let's not let it slip through our fingers. We don't have a priest who is out of touch with our reality. He's been through weakness and testing, experienced it all – all but the sin. So let's walk right up to him and get what he is so ready to give. Take the mercy, accept the help. (Hebrews 4:14-16)

France is a very secular culture. Our young friend Claire is not unusual in having grown up with no religious education. She told us, "I don't know any of the [Bible] stories about Mother Mary; but maybe that's better." I think she meant she feels a living connection with a spiritual mother and that's enough. She's afraid learning more will mean connecting less. She's afraid religion will get in the way. But I don't think so. I hope she'll learn the Mary stories of the Annunciation, the Visitation, the Nativity, the presentation in the Temple, flight to Egypt, wedding at Cana in Galilee, even the sadness of Mary standing at the foot of the cross.

Our **religion** means little if it's not grounded in **relationship** with our God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Many people associate religion with **rules**. There **are** rules, but they're only there to deepen and preserve **relationship** with our Lord and with our neighbors.

*"Then who has any chance at all?" "No one without the grace of God." **Grace**: the love of God that comes to us as gift, not reward. We believe that God's love flows to us most fully through the means of grace, the Word and the Sacraments. Gazing upon the Virgin's veil, a visible, physical presence comforts and heartens many. Our comfort, our strength, our hope, comes through our senses also: hearing the Word, feeling the coolness of baptismal water, seeing and tasting the bread of Holy Communion, smelling the fragrance of the wine. God's love for us is embodied in these ways. We realize this and cherish the audible, visible, tangible, smellable, tastable ways God comes, in love and power. We recognize it's not enough to obey all the **rules**; the heart of faith is our **relationship** with our Lord. **"He comes when called, and comes quickly."** *So let's walk right up to him and get what he is so ready to give. Take the mercy, accept the help. Amen**

¹*Interpreter's Bible, Vol. 7* (NY: Abingdon, 1951), p. 807.