

June 19, 2020

Last week I was surfing Masses as I am told many of you do too, and I came across a Mass when during the homily of that Mass the priest off handedly told the people that “you have to be sinless to be with God” as he went on to describe what he imagined happened on Calvary the day that Jesus was crucified.

The homily was a classic tour through what is called “atonement” theology which comes down heavily on a “sin offering” based understanding of sacrifice as in God demands bloody sacrifices to atone for our sins and in the case of Jesus, the Son of God, only that sacrifice could undo what Adam and Eve did.

(One might reasonably ask, What did Adam and Eve do.)

I seriously doubt that the categories of “sinner” and “sinless” were operational in the manner in which Jesus interacted with human beings, especially in a way that attempted to keep people away from and separate from God, the Divine Presence.

That kind of thinking and that kind of theology has a strong presence in the history of Christianity and as the Christian churches continue their decline in significance in the lives of ordinary people and the insecurities of the leaders of Christian churches rises, I think, exponentially, they double down of the use of guilt and shame to try and regain influence and, of course, power.

Even a shallow reading of the Gospels would indicate that one of the major objections to the ministry of Jesus was that “he ate with sinners,” “he welcomed them,” and most significantly he forgave them with no sacrifice of any kind whatsoever, they didn’t even have to ask to be forgiven in all but the case of Peter.

Repeatedly he brought himself into conflict with the atonement sacrifices of the established Temple/animal sacrifice-based industry that much of official Judaism of his time had become.

In fact, he let the animals that were to be sacrificed go free.

Granted, I did not listen to the whole homily but I really cannot handle imagined scenarios that delve into the emotional and psychological states of anyone in any Gospel story, nor can I handle additions to the story that “flesh” it out and make it more contemporary or “understandable.”

What is written is the Word of God not what I imagine and if the text doesn't talk about it, I try not to invent it because that just makes Sacred Scripture become fiction or, more accurately, fantasy.

If I make up additional details or project motives or moods or actions not explicit in the text, it is not God's word but my word.

Aleksander Hemon (born 1964) is an American fiction writer born in Bosnia and as a tourist in the United States when war broke out in Bosnia in 1992, he was unable to return to his native country and after a number of entry level jobs began to publish his work here and is currently a professor of creative writing at Princeton living there with his second wife and two daughters.

His second daughter, Isabel, died at the age of one from complications of a brain tumor.

I came across him when I read his novel, **The Lazarus Project**, the true story of Lazarus Averbuck, a Russian Jewish immigrant, who was killed by the Chicago chief of police on March 2, 1908. I cannot recommend this book enough as it is a timely reflection on our times and the chronic absence of wise and thoughtful people to encourage us to love ourselves and quit evaluating ourselves with impossible to achieve standards of excellence, importance, or wealth and health over and against one another.

In an interview with Teju Cole he was asked “where do you stand in relationship to transcendence (a possible understanding for what many of us call God)?”

His answer:

“As for faith: I don't believe in the Christian god, or the Muslim one, or the Jewish one. I'm sentimentally attached to some of the Yoruba and Greek gods—the stories are too good, too insightful, for a wholesale rejection—though I don't ask them for favors.

What do I believe in? Imagination, gardens, science, poetry, love, and a variety of nonviolent consolations. I suspect that in aggregate all this isn't enough, but it's where I am for now."

Where am I now?

Where are you now?

What do we believe?