

Veils

Homily on Isaiah 25:6-10 – Wednesday of the First Week of Advent

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Professor Peter Kreeft, a philosopher at Boston College wrote a fine little book which I recommend to you. It is titled *Back to Virtue: Traditional Moral Wisdom for Modern Moral Confusion*. In the book Kreeft notes that “All practical philosophers, that is, all seekers of wisdom who think about what to do and how to live, say four basic things, simply because the structure of our existence is such that there are only four basic things to say, four basic questions to answer.”¹ Professor Kreeft describes these in terms of a medical diagnosis.

1. Observation of symptoms
2. Diagnosis of disease
3. Prognosis of cure
4. Prescription for treatment²

Kreeft goes on to show how the great philosophers and religious teachers’ insights can be described using this four-fold scheme, which I will paraphrase. For example, he summarizes the Stoics’ teaching saying that the problem is our unhappiness.³ The

¹ Peter Kreeft, *Back to Virtue: Traditional Moral Wisdom for Modern Moral Confusion* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 38.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 39-40

cause of our problem is our passions.⁴ The cure to our problem would be peace of mind.⁵ And the prescription to bring about that cure is *apatheia* (passionless).⁶ As an aside, Kreeft suggests that this Stoic approach is behind pop psychology (which doesn't have much to do with real psychology or therapy).⁷ You can do the same exercise with Plato or Buddha or other wisdom teachers. If you do, you will discover many similarities in diagnosis, cure and treatment.

You can also do it with Christ's teaching, but if you do you will discover a dramatically different result.

The Prophet Isaiah wrote: "On this mountain he will destroy the veil that veils all peoples, the web that is woven over all nations; he will destroy death forever."⁸ Kreeft applies his medical diagnosis to human life viewed through the lens of the Bible and concludes that the "most spectacular symptom of our spiritual disease is death."⁹ The cause of death, the Bible tells us, is sin. The cure for sin is grace, for we cannot overcome sin and death by our own effort.¹⁰ The prescription is to take the divine medicine of grace, which we do by faith.¹¹

This is all simple enough, but as the Prophet Isaiah notes, death is a veil. Part of the problem is that while we are under death's control, our eyes and minds are veiled, allowing us to only partially see the truth. This is why the revelation of Christ is

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 39.

⁸ Isaiah 25:7

⁹ Kreeft, Op. cit., 40-41.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

necessary. And the revelation defines terms for us in a rather precise way. Death is unnatural. Humanity was created to live in fellowship with God.¹² Sin is an act of separation from God which created this unnatural existence in us. Applying the literary image of the Book of Genesis, after Adam this fellowship is lost. No amount of virtuous living will get it back. It was a gift in the first place. Only another gift can repair it.

That gift of course is Jesus Christ. When the Bible calls him the new Adam, it implies that God is re-creating.¹³ By being grafted onto the body of the new Adam, his life will flow through us and the disease of death will be cured. In the end, salvation is a kind of transplant surgery. It is not a mental activity of believing certain propositions of truth, but being made part of the living body of Christ from whom we can draw life.

If faith is not mere assent to certain propositions (as the rationalists would hold) what is it? The Bible tells us “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”¹⁴ Abraham is held up by the author of the Letter to the Hebrews as the example of faith. In biblical literature, what Abraham is praised for is faith, here meaning a “future orientated trust.”¹⁵ He obeys before knowing. He is convinced without seeing. His hope is born of trust, trust in the God who has offered him

¹² Genesis 3:8 describes the Lord walking in the Garden of Eden, looking for Adam and Eve. This implies the close relationship which the Lord permitted to humanity and himself and describes what was lost by the ancestral sin.

¹³ 1 Cor. 15:45

¹⁴ Hebrews 11:1

¹⁵ Pamela Eisenbaum, “The Letter to the Hebrews,” in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, eds. Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 421.

relationship. Hebrews will later call Jesus “the pioneer and perfecter of our faith” for his own trust and perseverance in the passion.¹⁶

Advent is the season of faith, the prescription with cures all human ills. Let us accept this gift, this theological virtue given us in baptism and engendered in us by grace, which grafts us onto the living body of Christ. Let us live in Christ, as disciples sitting at his feet, listening to him, hearing his words, sharing his life.¹⁷

¹⁶ Hebrews 12:2

¹⁷ Stuart Brisco, “Ordinary Folk Make Great Disciples,” in *Preaching Today*, (1987), no. 47.