

21 June 2020

Dear Friends of Elmwood,

My grandfather gave a Bible to each of his grandchildren on their seventh birthday. I was the youngest, the last to receive one. He inscribed and dated it with handsome handwriting.

On the back, in the bottom right hand corner, the words “Genuine Leather” are stamped in small gold letters. On the front, in large letters, it says “Holy Bible”, also in gold.

My siblings’ Bibles were black leather. Mine was dark blue. I felt this made mine better than theirs, but of course they wouldn’t agree.

It was the first ‘grown up’ object I’d owned, a little step in the direction of adulthood’s promised land, a place I couldn’t wait to inhabit. Adults seemed to know, all by themselves and in every situation, just what to do, just how to do it, and just as they liked.

Sunday Schooling

For a long time, I couldn’t make much sense of this Bible. It didn’t help that its strange names and difficult words were printed in small, dense letters. The Psalms drew me because there was more ‘white space’ around the words, making me believe they’d be easier to read. They weren’t. I’d sound out the words, but the larger meaning eluded me.

Instead, I pored over the vivid colour plates interleaved through its pages. Fixed in my memory is an artist’s rendering of a boyish, beaming Jesus, encircled by berobed, bearded elders. The caption said, “Jesus questions the elders in the Temple.”

So, Jesus went to Sunday School too! That’s where most of us heard the Bible’s stories for the first time. We learned the meanings of those strange words, the legends behind the odd names, the difference between Old and New Testaments, the names of all the books, and how to look something up by chapter and verse. We assigned some verses to memory. And we asked questions, lots of head-scratching questions.

It’s a great sorrow in my life as a Minister that I’ve failed to incite a spark of similar curiosity in the children I’ve been charged to teach and mentor. They’ve all yawned and drifted away.

“You’ve got to make it *fun*,” I’m told. But no, it was never about ‘fun’. It was about the wide-eyed, tongue-tied excitement children feel when they’re ushered into the hush and mystery of a seriously adult world.

It was about desperately wanting to grow up.

Family Trees and Veneration

The Church of my childhood had its own large, leather-bound Bible. The Minister read from it every Sunday. It resembled those huge ‘Family Bibles’ that were once passed down from generation to generation.

Their size and weight made them clumsy to read, and they rarely were. A Family Bible was *un objet d’art*, richly bound, a visual delight, and meant for display. It declared something vital about the household. This big book belonged to the family because they belonged to the big story it told.

They registered the family’s marriages, births, and deaths on those florid pages dividing the Old Testament from the New. I remember, at a tender age, keenly searching for my own name. And there it was, the most recent entry, written in the same careful hand that inscribed my blue leather Bible.

No one records their family tree in the pages of Shakespeare, the Oxford English Dictionary, or the Encyclopaedia Britannica, do they? But the Bible is a book already filled with genealogies. The family see their own ‘family tree’ as a branch of an older ‘spiritual’ one, stemming from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

The things we venerate we also make aesthetically pleasing. A primordial bond links truth and goodness with beauty. The ancient Greeks knew this. (We might ask ourselves, therefore, why Canadian cities are so barbarically ugly and loud. Who are the civilised ones?)

As a child, I twigged to the fact that the Bible *looked* special because it *was* special. It was beautiful to behold, treated with care, and deserved my respect. It was, after all, ‘The *Holy Bible*’, as mine proclaimed itself to be in those large, gold letters.

And yet, the Bible was never meant only to be gazed upon. It’s meant to be read and heard and understood.

Liturgy and Life

When I was a student at Knox College, decades ago, I was taught ‘liturgics’ (i.e., the theory and practice of worship) by a brilliant man who’d been steeped in the ‘high church’ tradition. I drew to this tradition back then. I still do.

‘High Church’ traditions believe that ‘form’ matters and ‘formlessness’ is meaninglessness. Done well and in the right context, formality is graceful, though it takes effort; but in the wrong context ‘informality’ is ugly and lazy.

It’s a heresy bequeathed by Baby Boomers – but now cultural orthodoxy – to believe anything ‘formal’ is fake. Doesn’t ‘formality’ stifle our spirits? Isn’t ‘informality’ authentic and liberating? It lets the *real* me breathe. “This necktie is a noose!” said a generation of men (long ago now), freeing their necks from the tyranny of neckwear. They dared to leave the top button open! How brave!

This only made the open-necked shirt into the new formality. For a self-styled ‘cult of informality’ can be just as reactionary as a ‘cult of formality’. It begins well, in brave rebellion against lifeless rules and stale forms. But if it gets stuck in this phase, like a child who refuses to grow up, it will never try to devise better rules or make more lively forms. It has convinced itself that rules and forms were the whole problem all along. “Didn’t they keep us from being ‘real’? Away with them forever!”

Something oddly similar happened in Stalin’s Russia. Long after the battle was won, the purges carried on. Revolution became the State’s permanent posture. But the war on counter revolutionaries was, in fact, a deadly new orthodoxy, and quite reactionary, even though Stalin’s ‘enemies’ were either imaginary, dead, or dying in the Gulag. “Away with them forever!”

In a similar way, though far less fierce of course, the ‘cult of informality’ fails to notice that its own ‘revolution’ may, ironically, devolve into one more stifling ‘formality’. It’s the refusal to notice this that makes it into a ‘cult’.

I see this flaw at work in many Churches. I still wear a black cassock and gown in worship, even when it’s hot and humid. I know. It’s very ‘old school’, ‘formal’, and quite boring. What’s wrong with me?

But whenever I’m told, “What are you wearing *that* for? My sister’s Minister just wears jeans and a T-shirt. It’s much more *relatable*, you know,” my resolve hardens. I’m just that stubborn. But you already knew that.

So, I pretend to myself that it’s brave and radical to be one of the last ‘men in black’. It’s liberating to be non-conformist, to rebel against the tyranny of the clergy-wear *du jour*: skinny jeans, a T-shirt blazoned with religious kitsch, and a Madonna-style microphone to enable a Ted-talk ‘message’ on a power-point screen. To me, these all reek of a new dead formality.

And yet, forms evolve. They must.

Here's the point. Forms are necessary, and forms connote formality. To express itself, beauty needs *living* forms, not dead ones. So do truth and goodness. When all three coincide, we're in the presence of something exciting and very powerful. Done well, with effort, there's nothing 'stiff', 'stuck', or 'stifling' about it.

My 'high Church' teacher taught me why magnificent architecture, heightened language, intricate music, a beautifully bound Bible read aloud with articulate care – i.e., all the gracious gestures of 'formal' worship – deserve our best effort and inspired innovation. For the thing we value most must be most aesthetically pleasing.

Story or Instruction?

In the Church of my childhood, the custodian (called 'the beadle' in Scotland), preceded the Minister into the sanctuary (a custom we've lost at Elmwood). The congregation would rise as one body. For the beadle's weathered hands carried the Church's Bible, large and leather-bound. He'd place it on the lectern and open it to the page book-marked for the reading that day.

Even as a little boy, prone to boredom and daydreams, I knew something vital was happening. What was it? What did it mean? "Let me see too!"

"At the entrance of the Bible, don't think the people rise to their feet because of *you*," my 'high Church' teacher barked at a classroom full of would-be Ministers. "Get that out of your heads right now. They're standing out of respect for a venerable Book. It arrives in the sanctuary before *you* do. You will serve your people well by being a servant of this Book."

Public worship in a sanctuary is the Bible's first and most natural home. "This is God's house," my mother whispered, gripping my hand a little too firmly. It's my earliest memory of Church. Her grip meant this: "What happens here is serious and wonderful and grown up. Behave!"

I was a mischievous boy, but I understood. Not just because she'd warned me, but because I immediately sensed there's truth embedded in wonder and seriousness. "God's house!" I thought to myself, my eyes as wide as saucers. And, in that way childlike minds have of making metaphors 'literal', I pictured God at home in the dark, mysterious space behind the organ pipes.

Bad religion is all didactic and dogmatic. The worst kind of Christian has only "the cruelty of doctrine without the poetic grace of myth," says Dunstan Ramsey in Robertson Davies' *Fifth Business*.

But good religion is, first of all, a union of truth, goodness, and beauty, symbolised in living forms. But so is the Bible. When the poetry of its story is usurped by moralistic instruction, its 'charge' goes 'flat'. It's as dead as a dead battery.

In liturgy, as in life, moral instruction should always take second place. First place goes to veneration. Learning to venerate the right things well is the beginning of wisdom. Only when they grip us firmly by the hand can we begin to 'behave' in accord with 'truth, beauty, and goodness'.

This is our first step in the direction of adulthood's promised land. There we can risk a life lived in confidence. Such confidence is already a kind of faith (*confidentia* in Latin, 'with faith'). It can be *self*-confidence because it's grounded in divine trust. We come to know just what to do, just how to do it, and just as we like. But if we miss that first step, we never do grow up.

How, then, *should* the Bible instruct us? After all, it's not just meant to be gazed upon. It's meant to be read, heard, understood – and *acted* upon. What is the connection between the Bible and Life, between reading and doing?

But lucky you. I've run out of space, haven't I? Maybe I'll indulge myself by tackling this question in a future letter. You know how I like to indulge myself.

"As you were..."

Bill Booth has been admitted to hospital again. Nancy Abernethy's mother is improving. Irene King is recovering well at home after some surgery. Al McLean continues to do well. You know the drill. We shall keep them all, and each other, in our prayers.

This week, I received a beautiful, hand-written note. It's meant for all of you. "Thank you for your thoughts, prayers, and cards during our time of sorrow and grieving. It is very much appreciated." It's signed, "Peter, Suzette, and Isabella James."

We continue to thank God for the life of Pat James. And we await with hope the day when we will thank God in his house, worshipfully and, I dare say, 'formally'.

Yours in the faith,
Andrew