

Hospital Kiosk

This is the first time I've stepped into the pulpit since I sent out the news that I am retiring as Dean of Trinity Cathedral at the end of 2022. I'm not going to reiterate what I said in the letter to you, but I *will* say what I told the vestry: we have all been through this before. I have stood in the pulpit after announcing I'm leaving, and all who hear the news have seen clergy leave. That doesn't make it any less painful, but it does mean that we will get through this. We have the emotional resources to deal with the grief, and Trinity Cathedral has the resources to find and call the next Dean. I'm reminded of what a priest mentor often said as we sat in his office: this was their church before I came, and it will be their church after I leave. His responsibility was to keep everything shipshape and on course for the next person who would be in charge.

Staying on course is an important responsibility, and I've tried to do my best keeping the cathedral on course through all that has happened over the last ten years. It's too easy in this world to go astray, to "turn aside to the right hand or the left" as the Bible says. In our Old Testament reading this morning, the prophet Jeremiah reminded us that when we go after worthless things, we become worthless ourselves. That's because the course we set determines where we will end up. We can run off course without knowing it.

I thought of that after a recent hospital visit where I encountered a new protocol. Instead of being screened for COVID exposure at the front desk by a human being, I found a kiosk with a tablet and card reader for my driver's license. If I followed the tablet's instructions carefully, the card reader would return my license and another machine would spit out a visitor's badge. I suppose the hospital administrators think they'll save money by hiring fewer people. Ironically, a hospital employee still had to stand there to help baffled visitors at the kiosk.

That hospital experience was a topic among those who came to Morning Prayer the next day, leading to a general discussion of how virtual interactions have replaced human ones. The most extreme example is the so-called virtual reality goggles that one can wear to experience being in a fantasy world. During our conversation someone called this replacement of human interaction demonic because it diminishes the goodness and value of human beings and even of creation itself. That may explain why virtual reality and similar things like video games are so addictive.

It's not much of a stretch to connect this with Jeremiah's powerful condemnation. Is there not a resemblance between an addictive game and a cracked cistern that holds no water? Whatever gets poured into either one is lost, and yet they demand more. When we eliminate human interactions, we reduce the ways in which we can encounter God in other people and thus we forsake him. Surely the hospital administrators were not thinking about that when they put in the kiosk. Most likely they were thinking of the bottom line, one of the many gods in our culture that is *not* a fountain of living water.

It's ironic that the hospital system with the kiosk came from a merger of two faith-based hospitals, one Episcopal and one Roman Catholic. To its credit, the current system still considers spiritual care to be an important part of the healing process. During COVID time clergy were not "counted" toward the visitor limit. On the other hand, the in-house chaplain staff is much smaller than it once was. Somehow I hear echoes of the progression of leadership failure that Jeremiah

describes. In Israel, he said, the priests did not call upon God, those who handled the law did not know God, the rulers transgressed against God, and the prophets prophesied by Baal. With that kind of leadership, what hope did the people have?

The hymn we just sang began with “All my hope on God is founded.” That’s really the key, isn’t it? I have often pointed out that the central stained glass window over the cathedral altar is Jesus, holding the world in one hand and blessing it with the other. Each week all of you and the priest at the altar face that window so that we can remember that it is Jesus whom we follow.

And that’s why I’m not worried about the future of Trinity Cathedral. Our culture may hold up other gods to follow, and encourage us to build cracked cisterns that hold no water, but as long as we keep our eyes on Jesus we will stay on course. If all our hope on God is founded, God will lead the way. That was true before I came, it will be true after I go, and it will be true for all eternity.

[Pentecost 12: Jeremiah 2:4-13; Psalm 81; Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16; Luke 14:1, 7-14.]