

THE SECRET OF PROGRESS

Ted Schroder, March 7, 2010

“Jesus said, I am the Way, The Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6)

The aim of the great religions of the world is to make progress in the spiritual life, to come to fullness of life, to know God. Liliias Trotter, in her attempt to reach the Sufi mystics acknowledged that three of the great aims of the Sufis were to follow the Way, and to know the Truth, and to live the Life of God; and the question before them was how to progress from step to step in reaching these aims. God who understood the love of progress that He had created in us, had met our desire in Christ, and had given Him the power to draw us upward to the place where He had gone. These three titles are joined together like the links of a chain:

“I am the Way” – a path prepared.

“I am the Truth” – light to reveal the path.

“I am the Life” – strength to tread the path.

What is this True and Living Way which Christ embodies? From the beginning Christians were called those who belonged to the Way. (Acts 9:2) What kind of Way is it?

It is the Way of the Cross. A prayer for Palm Sunday encapsulates this Way: “Almighty God, whose most dear Son went not up to joy but first he suffered pain, and entered not into glory before he was crucified: Mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the cross, may find it none other than the way of life and peace.” What is the Way of the Cross, and how can we find it none other than the way of life and peace?

Jesus explained to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. Likewise he said that his followers must deny themselves and take up their cross. (Matthew 16:21,24) His True and Living Way is a way of suffering and atonement.

It is a Way that requires dying to sin and rising to a new life. We are united with him in his death and in his resurrection. (Romans 6) The Gospel proclaimed by the apostles was about Jesus Christ and him crucified. This message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to those who are being saved it is the power of God. (1 Corinthians 1:18; 2:2)

It is the Way of redemptive sacrifice, the Way in which the extent of the love of God is displayed. This is unique to the religions of the world. Only in Christ is love displayed in this Way. “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.” (1 John 3:16) This Way of Christ has unleashed all sorts of sacrificial efforts to care for others: hospitals, orphanages, medical and educational work all over the world.

It is the Way of power made perfect in weakness. It is why, for Christ’s sake, we “delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties, For when we are weak, then we are strong.” (2 Corinthians 12:10) It is why we rejoice in sufferings, and why we identify with those who suffer rather than with those who are powerful. Therefore, it is not the way of triumphalism, of avoiding or escaping from the problems of this world, or denying the realities of life. It is the way of facing up to sin, and addictions, and obsessions, and other difficulties.

It is the Way to the Father for all people. “He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.” (1 John 2:2) It is through the Cross that all people can come to the Father, whether they know it or not.

It is the only Way to come to the Father. The uniqueness of Jesus is to reveal to us God as our Father, and His Father. We come to know God as our Father uniquely through Jesus. “No

one comes to the Father except through me. If you really knew me you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him.” (John 14:6,7)

It is the Way to the Father’s house. “I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.” (John 14:2,3)

Bilquis Shekh was the widow of General Sheikh, who had been the minister of the interior in the Pakistan government. A devout Muslim, she had been having dreams about God as she searched for comfort in her loneliness. She was reading the Quran and was impressed by its many references to the Jewish and Christian writings that preceded it. She wondered whether she should continue her search among those earlier books. She had been taught that the early Christian had falsified so much of the Bible. But the idea of reading the Bible became more and more insistent. What was the Bible’s concept of God? What did it say about the prophet Jesus? She asked her Christian servant to acquire her a Bible. He did, but it was an old translation that was difficult for her. She paid a visit to the wife of a local missionary who gave her a copy of Phillips’ translation of the New Testament, and who told her to read the Gospel of John. When visiting in the Holy Family Hospital in Rawalpindi she met Dr Pia Santiago, the Filipino hospital administrator, who was also a nun. She confided about her spiritual confusion. Dr Santiago encouraged her: “Why don’t you pray to the God you are searching for? Ask him to show you His way. Talk to Him as if He were your friend. Talk to Him, as if He were your father.”

These words shot through her being like electricity. “Talk to God as if He were my father! The thought shook my soul in the peculiar way truth has of being at once startling and comforting.” After returning home she went to her bedroom to consider all that had been happening. No Muslim, she felt certain, ever thought of Allah as his father. She got on her knees and tried to call God, “Father.” But it was a useless effort. It was ridiculous. “Wouldn’t it be sinful to try to bring the Great One down to our own level?” In the night she dreamed of her own loving father. Suppose, just suppose, God were like a father. She got out of bed, sank to her knees on the rug, looked up to heaven, and in a rich new understanding called God “my Father.”

“Father, O my Father God.” she cried, with growing confidence. But suddenly that room wasn’t empty any more. He was there! I could sense His Presence. “I could feel His hand laid gently on my head. It was as if I could see His eyes, filled with love and compassion. He was so close that I found myself laying my head on His knees like a little girl sitting at her father’s feet. For a long time I knelt there, sobbing quietly, floating in His love. I found myself talking with Him, apologizing for not having known Him before. And again came His loving compassion, like a warm blanket settling around me.

“I am confused, Father.” She picked up both the Quran and the Bible and asked, “Which, Father? Which one is Your book?”

“Then a remarkable thing happened. Nothing like it had ever occurred in my life in quite this way. For I heard a voice inside my being, a voice that spoke to me as clearly as if I were repeating words in my inner mind. They were fresh, full of kindness, yet at the same time full of authority.

‘In which book do you meet Me as your Father?’

“I found myself answering: ‘In the Bible.’ That’s all it took. Now there was no question in my mind which one was His book.” (Bilquis Sheikh with Richard H. Schneider, *I Dared To Call Him Father*, p.49)

Jesus did not just tell us the Way to God. He leads us to God as Father. Jesus did not just tell us the Truth of God. He embodies the Truth. Jesus did not just tell us about the Life of God. He is the source of Life which overflows to those who trust in him and follow him.

Follow my blog on www.ameliachapel.com/blog/