

Sermon for Grace and Holy Trinity Church, Richmond, VA
Proper 27, Year C, November 10, 2019
The Rev. Bill Queen, "Scripture, Tradition, Reason, and Experience"
2nd Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17

God: today may we behold your face; today may we adore your power; today may we, in all our actions, sing the wonders of your grace
[paraphrase of Hymn # 401 "The God of Abraham Praise"]

in our reading from 2nd Thessalonians today we hear the early church being told to "stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught by us;" that sounds like good advice that could be applicable to the church at almost any age, right?; hold fast to traditions!; you can almost hear Tevye singing "tradition!" at the beginning of *Fiddler on the Roof*; perhaps no other church loves its traditions as much as us Episcopalians

yet that statement about traditions has to raise questions for us, as this letter was probably written no more than 20 or 30 years after Jesus' death, well before the gospels had been written, so it is doubtful that the early church had had time to develop any real traditions by then; and most scholars agree that though this letter purports to be from Paul, that claim doesn't stand up to scrutiny

the very first question that vexed the early church had to do with tradition: did Gentiles, non-Jews, have to become Jews, by being circumcised, and by observing Jewish laws such as kosher dietary rules, before they could become baptized as Christians? interpretations of both scripture and tradition said that they had to become Jews first

it may seem that things like kosher animals and circumcision have no relevance to our lives as contemporary Christians; but the larger issue here, one that does have great relevance for us today; it is the question of how do we decide what to do, whenever we are faced with a new situation, like the church was facing in its early days; how do we decide what role scripture and tradition should play in settling new questions? how do we discern when God is working outside of what we have come to understand through both scripture and tradition?

you probably learned in confirmation class that one of the early and defining understandings of authority in the Church of England ('authority' being just another way of saying how things get decided) was that authority is based upon scripture, tradition, and reason; but that term 'reason' has to be understood the way it was defined in the 16th century, where it meant not just an intellectual rationality or theoretical knowledge, but rather as a reasonable and common sense accumulation of practical wisdom, what today we would characterize by using the term 'experience'

scripture, tradition, reason, and experience are best approached in that order; first, with scripture being the starting point, we ask: what does the Bible say, not literally, but with prayerful study and with critical reflection? next, continuing with tradition, we ask: how has the church understood and applied that scripture, rightly or wrongly? next, continuing with reason, we ask: how do we use the intelligence that God has given us to help us mediate difficulties, contradictions, and outdated understandings of scripture and of tradition?; what I did at the beginning of this sermon today, noting the question about Paul's authorship of 2nd Thessalonians, and the use of the word 'tradition' at an extremely early date, is such an example of applying reason to scripture; and finally, wrapping up with experience, we ask: what really works in our experience and, even more importantly, how do we experience God's working out of an issue before us?

this isn't just a Church of England or an Episcopalian understanding; this process is exactly what was used in the early church's first controversy; everything in scripture and in tradition told the first, almost exclusively Jewish, Christians that only Jews could be in a right relationship to God; but scripture and tradition both got overthrown by God, as the gift of the Holy Spirit was clearly given to Gentiles who had not first become observant Jews; the church began to understand that something new was happening because it could see how God was at work; and so the church officially decided to accept Gentiles without requiring them first to become Jews

the Episcopal Church has continued to use this process throughout its history, when faced with new situations; at times when other Christians and churches have said that African-Americans, or women, or lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer people should not have a place in the church or in church leadership, and have cited scripture verses and long-standing traditions against it, the Episcopal Church eventually critiqued those verses

and traditions in light of reason and experience—mainly because we could see how the Holy Spirit was at work in those Christians—and acted to incorporate them into the church and into lay and ordained church leadership

in each of these instances, even though it took far too much time to bring about and wasn't always handled with grace, we came to see, as the early church did with Gentiles, that if God gave black Christians, women Christians, and LGBTQ+ Christians, in the words of the book of Acts (11:17) “the same gift that God gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ” how could we “hinder God” by acting otherwise? we can't

in each of these instances the changes that the church has made have not been as a caving-in to politics or to popular culture; they have not been an ignoring of scripture nor a throwing out of tradition; they have always been a thoughtful, prayerful, reasonable, and experiential engagement with scripture, with tradition, and with the world in which we find ourselves—the world in which we are acting on Christ's behalf

so I invite you to use this same time-tested process of applying scripture, tradition, reason, and experience to any question you may be facing in your Christian life; be open in our parish life to new things, especially as we prepare for the arrival of a new Rector who may not hold as tightly to some of the traditions that you hold dear; and remember: God is always up to things that seem new and unfamiliar to us; God has been doing this throughout the Bible; God has been doing this ever since; and I expect God will continue doing this in the future; be open, be attentive, and be receptive whenever God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit are leading us into new experiences