

3<sup>rd</sup> after Epiphany

St. Barnabas, 2023

Is. 9:1-4

Mt. 4:12-23

Have you noticed how many times the word “soul” has appeared in the news lately? There’s Soul food in section D of the New York Times. There was the music genre “Soul” mentioned in the obituary of a rock star. Last Sunday at Martin Luther King’s Ebenezer Baptist Church, our president said, “At this inflection point, we know there’s a lot of work that has to continue on economic justice, civil rights, voting rights and protecting our democracy; and I’m remembering that our job is to redeem the soul of America....Progress” he continued, “is never easy. But redeeming the soul of the country is absolutely essential.” And a headline the same day read “Plundering Art, Russia Assaults Soul of Ukraine.”

Russian troops have looted Ukraine’s cultural institutions of some of the most important and intensely protected contributions of Ukraine and its forebears going back thousands of years. This plundering may be the single biggest collective art heist since the Nazis pillaged Europe in World War II. Russian troops have damaged or robbed more than 30 museums. The thefts are a broadside attack on Ukrainian pride, culture and identity, consistent with the imperial attitude of Russia’s president; for it has been reported to be a centrally controlled expert-led operation. In addition, Moscow has tried to suppress the Ukrainian language and anything that would bolster Ukrainian identity. “They stole our heritage, they believe that we wouldn’t continue to live and to create,” said one long-time director of museums, “I almost lost my mind.” “In plundering of Ukrainian Art, Russia Attacks a Nation’s Soul” read the headline on the following page. Why this expansive use of the word “soul”? Do we even know what “soul” means?

We can look up the definition of soul on the Web, but that definition is problematic: It reads, “the spiritual or immaterial part of a human being regarded as immortal; and emotional or intellectual energy or intensity especially as revealed in a work of art or an artistic performance.” Certainly there are places in the Old Testament where soul is synonymous with spirit and heart, but that business about being regarded as immortal (?) gets us into theological debates between Plato and Thomas Aquinas. Immaterial? Christians do not separate soul from body as Plato did. So where do we turn to find a palpable expression of soul?

Taking as an example the theft of Ukraine’s cultural heritage, we see an attempt to destroy a people’s identity. Such a theft of the artistic expression of soul is a reminder of the extraordinary steps the United States took during WWII to protect our museums. Speaking for the curators of the largest museums in America, Paul Sachs wrote, “If in time of peace, our museums and art galleries are important to the community, in time of war they are doubly valuable. For then, when the petty and the trivial fall

away and we are face to face with final and lasting values, we... must summon to our defense all our intellectual and spiritual resources. We must guard jealously all we have inherited from a long past, all we are capable of creating in a trying present, and all we are determined to preserve in a foreseeable future. Art is the imperishable and dynamic expression of these aims. It is, and always has been, the visible evidence of the activity of free minds....” Conservator George Stout then made the explicit connection between culture and soul: “These monuments,” he said, “are not merely pretty things, not merely valued signs of man’s creative power. They are expressions of faith, and they stand for man’s struggle to relate himself to his past and to his God.” [end quote]

As an expression of faith, Christian art of every sort---literature, music, painting, needlework, stone and wood craft---is always culturally specific; and there are those in the Abrahamic lineage who cling to traditional literature for revelation. But such reverence gives primacy to the cultural conditions out of which that literature sprang twenty centuries ago. Christians believe God’s revelation has come in a person, that that revelation was material, that the Word became flesh---the flesh of a particular human group, in a certain time and place. Hence Christ’s followers must in their turn creatively translate God’s guidance into their particular current setting, the culture in which they find and nurture their souls.

Christian literature is not a collection of chapters. Christian scripture is a human activity. Christian scripture is a living thing. Our scripture is a relationship between a text and communities that regard those texts as mediating that community’s understanding of itself. The Bible becomes scripture when brought into conversation with human knowledge, wisdom, experience, imagination across the ages, into the present, and in anticipation of the future. We cannot exhaust the truth God intends with just one, dated interpretation. We need to be in conversation with the text of the Bible and with one another as we seek transformation in the present. And so as a community that reads and sings scripture, we encounter this morning’s text as a current communication of soul.

The author of Matthew quotes Isaiah to describe the action in this morning’s gospel: “In the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali...the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness---on them light has shined.” And the result of that light? Immediately all four of the fishermen left their work and followed Him.

Have you ever asked yourself, “Why did they do that? Why did they not only stop what they were doing but walk away from their life’s vocation as if it could be cast aside.” What was it that these ordinary men saw in Jesus? Matthew attempts to tell us by quoting Isaiah’s poetic invocation of light. But what spark did Jesus’ presence set in motion? Put another way, what was the essence that radiated from Him?

Questions of essence or being have been debated since Anselm argued for the necessary existence of God, saying God is that than which nothing greater can be thought. But we continue to need

enlightenment. For if you follow the practice of reading evening prayer, you will find 16 times throughout the year that the psalms<sup>1</sup> designated begin: “The fool has said in his heart, ‘There is no God.’” In other words, there is a constant danger of falling into deep darkness, disconnected from our souls.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century Scottish philosopher Thomas Carlyle mused, “Does it ever give thee pause, that men used to have a soul---not by hearsay alone, or as a figure of speech; but as a truth that they knew, and acted upon? Verily it was another world then...but yet it is a pity we have lost the tidings of our souls...we shall have to go in search of them again, or worse in all ways shall befall us.”<sup>2</sup>

What are the tidings of our souls today? Are they not the creative results of reason and will? In the book entitled “The Guernsey Literary Potato Peel Pie Society,” a small group of English men and women who suffered in WWII under the occupation by the Nazis of the English Channel Islands grapple with the idea of the soul and its tidings. They sustain their reason and will, their souls, by reading great literature together. Each reads a different book, and then they take turns reporting on their reading at clandestine meetings. One such gentleman, having read Thomas Carlyle, asks the group, “Did any of you ever think that along about the time the notion of a SOUL gave out, Freud popped up the EGO to take its place? The timing of the man! Did he not pause to reflect? Irresponsible old coot! It is my belief that men must spout this twaddle about egos, because they fear they have no soul! Think upon it! Isn’t that something---to know your own soul by hearsay instead of its own tidings? If I could believe I had a soul, all by myself, then I could listen to its tidings all by myself.”

What are the tidings of your soul? What are the tidings of mine? If one cares deeply about someone or some thing, one throws a kind of energy out into the world. These tidings, this energy mirrors our character, our essence. We express the tidings of our soul in language, in art, in acts of charity, in demonstrations of love, in prayers for others; and “fruitfulness” is drawn in. Jesus was He whose essence was apparent to those He encountered by the sea of Galilee. His was the light that dawned upon them. Jesus was the perfectly embodied soul. So they left their nets and followed Him, and so can we.

(The Rev.) Judith M. McDaniel, Ph. D.

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<sup>1</sup> Psalms 14 and 53.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Carlyle, *Past and Present*, 1843.