

“The Way” – Rev. Peter Coutts, July 14, 2024

Acts 21: 37 – 22: 16



In Paul’s telling of his personal story, he refers to “the Way”. The Way. This was the earliest name for Christianity. I love that name, because the image of “the way” has rich connotations for us. At the Last Supper Jesus declared, “I am the way, the truth and the life.” He invited people to be followers, which implies movement on a way. A disciple, according to the Cambridge Dictionary, is a person who tries to live the way of a teacher. As people of faith, we walk in the ways of Jesus.

So, if Christianity is “the Way”, what does the way look like? What does it look like? Preachers (including me) often root sermons in this format: “this is how they followed the way back then...and this is how we can do it here and now.”



Sacre Coeur, Paris

But what about the 2,000 years in that gap? What has the Way looked like, through the history of the Christian faith? How has it evolved? As some of you know, Sheri and I have recently returned from spending a week in Barcelona and four weeks in France. I found it a humbling journey, vividly seeing how the Way has been followed so differently over time. And it caused me to reflect, time and again, on how I assume the Way should be followed. Here are a few tales from the trip.



Sant Paul del Camp Sanctuary – 9th Century Barcelona

One of the great, tangible indicators of how the Way has evolved over time are places of worship. In Barcelona we visited a 9th century chapel that was a part of an early monastery. Very simple, but still inspiring, to think that this has been a place of worship for more than 1,100 years. Over time sanctuaries became more and more awesome...which was, in part, the point. These sanctuaries were intended to inspire faith.



Sagrada Familiar – Started 1882 – Architect Gaudi Died 1926

An excellent example is the Sagrada Familia, also in Barcelona. Under construction now for 140 years, it not only honours the “sacred family” but also God’s creation.



Each window has the name of a saint. The example of saints can illuminate how the Way has been followed, literally illustrated in these windows by light shining through the names of saints.



One of my favourite churches we visited was Santa Maria de Mar, also in Barcelona, built in the 14th century. The people in that neighbourhood (mostly families who made their living fishing) wanted their own church. They wanted it so bad that even the poorest of the poor made financial donations. Everybody volunteered to carry stones to help the masons work more quickly. Construction was completed in 55 years. A place built to God's glory! A place built where people could gather to glorify God in worship. To remind themselves that they are blessed by God. The day we visited, the priest was meeting with a small group to plan a wedding! Places like this remind us that for us, as people of the Way, it is about acknowledging and honouring and glorifying God: both in the grand ways in the majesty of a cathedral (that will exist for 100's of years), and in the very common place ways, like two people being joined in marriage. People making the Way part of their journey through life. Inspired by these holy places, I found myself reflecting time and again, "How do I glorify God, as a person of the Way, through the journey of my own life? How am I following The Way."



When you step into a church that is 100 years old, or 700 years old, or more than 1,000 years old, the history drives home the reality that the people of the Way include countless generations, who have passed on the Way generation to generation. As they have passed it on to us, so we are to pass it on to the next generation. The Sagrada Familia embodies that message. Not yet finished, it is being built for the sake of countless generations of people of the Way yet to come. We have a long history of glorifying God, and a long future of glorifying God, that we are called to help make happen.



Spending time in these churches reminds you, time and again, how different the Roman Catholic way is compared to ours. The greater emphasis on Jesus' death on the cross, for our sake.



Devotion to Mary, the mother of Jesus.
Praying to saints. The list goes on.



It is easy to be critical and think that we
come from a more enlightened point of
view about the Christian faith. To believe
that we have it figured out now, much
better than they did back then.



But as Sheri and I observed solitary persons sitting quietly in a sanctuary, or praying to a saint, or lighting a candle, as you appreciate the message conveyed by artwork, one can't help but be struck by the sincerity of the way of faith down through the ages... even if that way is different from ours.



9th
Century
Chapel
in a Cave
near
Arles...
Monks
lived in
the cave.

After all, Christianity has evolved down through the ages...and splintered...and diversified. It is estimated that there are some 45,000 different Christian denominations in the world today: each understanding the Way a little differently from the other. Even within our own congregation, how each of us understands the Way can vary some from each other. I found myself reflecting, that we all need humility as we compare our understanding of the Way to what is believed and practiced by others who also call themselves Christian.



That said, people of faith have not always had that humility. In Arles in France, we happened upon a Reformed Church. Quite a surprise! [We are part of the Reformed family of faith]. When we think about the Reformation, we recall places like Germany, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Scotland. But France?



We forget that Jean Calvin was a lawyer in Paris before he became a theologian. The south of France—Provence (where Arles is)—was the heartland for the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century for that country. 55 years after Martin Luther nailed his 95 issues with the Catholic Church on his abbey door in Germany, 10% of French population were Protestants, called Huguenots.



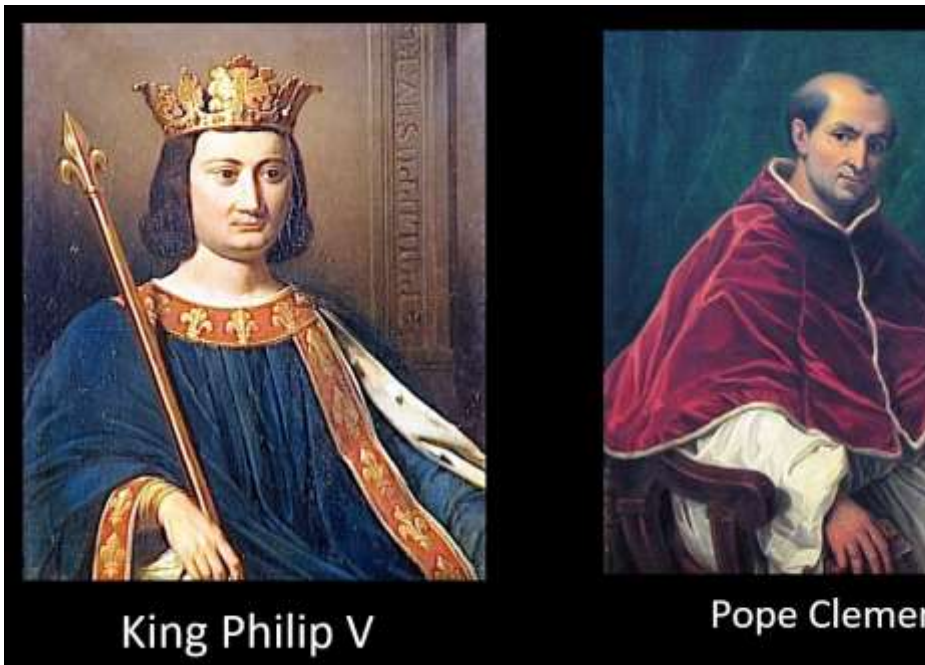
Those in the majority did not tolerate the Huguenots, resulting in 40 years of religious wars in France at the end of the 16th century. It is estimated that between 2 and 4 million people died during that religious war—Christian against Christian. The Dragonnades instituted by King Louis XIV directed the forced conversion of Protestants to Catholicism, and four years later it became illegal to be Protestant. 100 years after persecution began, Protestantism had disappeared in France. Some Huguenots emigrated to Lower Canada (Quebec) to escape persecution, but they soon learned that it was here in Canada as well. Intolerance. Intolerance over a difference in what Christians believed about the Way. But intolerance was even more widespread.



One shameful example was the Spanish Inquisition. When southern Spain was controlled by the Moors (who were Muslims) they were very tolerant of Jews and Christians who lived among them. When the Christians regained control of the territory at the end of the 15th century, they established the Inquisition as a formal, judicial institution to combat heresy. If you were a Jew or a Muslim, the choice was simple: baptism or death. The Spanish Inquisition—that began in the 15th C—existed until 1834, and it is estimated that around 150,000 people were prosecuted by the tribunal. This is how the Way was understood at the beginning of the Renaissance in France.



Again, it is easy from our modern perspective to pass judgment on historic persecutions pursued in the name of Christ. But reflecting on this tragic history, in which the Way so obviously went astray, should prompt us to inquire of ourselves: are there some people who we feel intolerant of? We need only remember that Jesus was always busting through the taboos of intolerance of his day, speaking with: women, touching lepers, going into Gentile towns, dining with tax collectors, even engaging the Roman soldiers who oppressed them. Clearly, back then, the Way lost its way. And that should prompt us to be cautious about how we follow the way.



King Philip V

Pope Clement V

At times the Way was overtly shaped by politics. In the 13th century King Philip IV of France wanted the Pope to help fund France's war with England. The Pope refused. Infuriated, King Philip decided it was high time for a French Pope! Soon, Philip was able to bring all his influence to bear, leading to the election of Pope Clement V (a Frenchman). Then, as a means of increasing King Philip's influence, the residence of the Pope was moved from Rome to Avignon in Provence.



The Popes' Palace, Avignon

Eight Popes lived in the Palace of the Popes in Avignon, over about an 80-year period. It is one of the largest Medieval Gothic buildings in Europe, and in every way it is a fortress! It is astonishing how impregnable this building is. It was as if they were saying: “Now that we have the Pope living here, we will build him a castle that will prevent taking the Pope back to Rome.” Well, the Popes didn’t stay, and the official residence was returned to Rome in 1377 [but for about 25 years after, there were continually 2 Popes, one in each location, each declaring that they were the legitimate Pope]. All this happened because the King of France wanted the Pope to fund his war with England.



Politics trumping, and defining, the Way. Again, it is too easy to look back and say “we don’t do that anymore.” But is that true? My favourite contemporary theologian—Stanley Hauerwas—says, “Tell me your politics and I will tell you your religion.” It’s his observation that Christians in the west too easily let their politics shape how they follow the way rather than the other way around. It prompts another question for reflection: how does my faith and my politics meet, and which one dominates the other?



Young Artists
Being Inspired by
Van Gogh's
Hospital

How Van Gogh's
Room Would Look
In 1890

Fortunately, many many times the Way went right. In St. Remy there is a psychiatric hospital where Vincent Van Gogh spent a year of his life (1890) and painted some of his best known works. Nuns from the Order of St. Joseph managed the hospital, and continued to do so until 2017. One of the hospital's specialties is art therapy. On the trip we saw several examples of religious communities that built their life around helping people in their needs. A core tenet of the Way.



Íñigo López de Oñaz

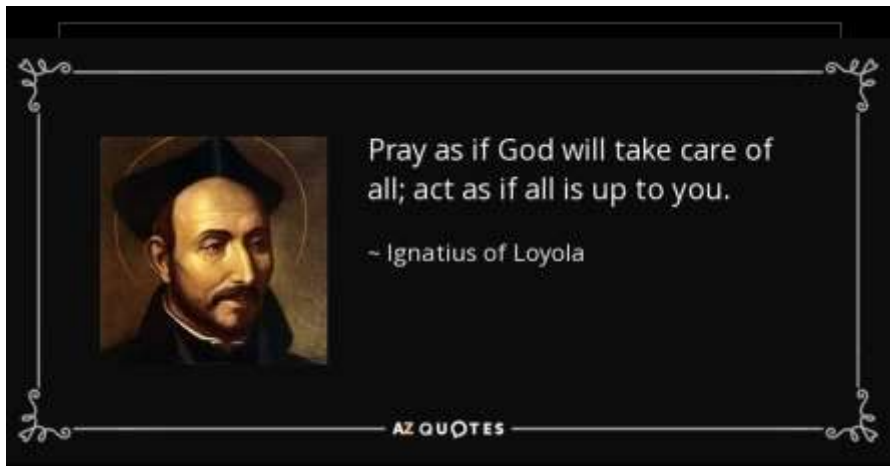
1491 - 1556

We also heard stories of individuals who discerned a way for themselves that influenced the future of Christianity. Inigo Lopez de Onaz was born in 1491 in Spain, the youngest of 13 children in a noble family. Being #13, he didn't have great prospects, so he joined the army. At the age of 30, his leg was broken by a ricocheting cannonball. He returned home, endured several rounds of 16th century surgery to mend his leg. He ended up with a lifelong limp. In his time of recovery, he read of the lives of saints, being particularly inspired by St. Francis of Assisi.

Montserrat, Spain



Once he could walk again, he made a pilgrimage to Santa Maria de Montserrat: a monastery built high in the rugged mountains outside Barcelona. There he reflected on his life, examined his past sins, committed to a new life, gave his rich clothes to the poor, and took to wearing sackcloth. He then committed to a pilgrimage, walking from Montserrat to Jerusalem via Rome. Remember his injured leg? He adopted self-imposed poverty, mimicking Christ. At times he lived in caves. He worked in hospitals in trade for room and board. He spent much time in prayer, developing a daily personal spiritual practice on his way to Jerusalem.



Today we know this man as Ignatius of Loyola, one of the founders of the Jesuit Order of the Roman Catholic Church. His spiritual exercises—a set of Christian meditation practices, contemplations, discernment and prayers—developed on his pilgrimage, practices to lead to a change of heart, and a way to know God.



Christianity has been the better for it, for the spiritual practices of Ignatius became historically foundational for spiritual practices to come. For example, the case has been made that Ignatian spirituality influenced the spiritual habits of the Wesley brothers, founders of the Methodist Movement...and it was in Methodist spiritual practices that I was raised. So, my thanks to Ignatius, and to God, for the spiritual renewal Ignatius experienced at Montserrat. The way he developed influenced THE Way.



Our trip immersed us in over 1,000 years of Christian history. It's mind-boggling. The trip made so vivid the historic fact that the Way has evolved significantly over time—for good and for bad. My reflections have challenged me to always remember that my way of faith is simply that: MY way. And not The Way, completely. Thus, I should hold it loosely, because our journey through history made it so very clear that there have been other ways to be Christian....and implying that in the future there will be other ways as well. Ways held sincerely: past, present, future. So I should hold my way loosely, because I can't anticipate how I will want to change it one day....how changing society may influence me to change it one day....and perhaps the Holy Spirit's influence inspiring me to change it one day. Which brings up my final thought. Did God influence my reflections on this journey? I think so. Especially one moment.



Avignon City Walls

I went out at dusk to take a very wide panorama image of the walls of Avignon. As I was setting up in the grassy median between two busy roads, I saw a young couple approaching me. They were curious about what I was up to. In the growing darkness, they thought I was one of those guys with the metal detectors you might see at the beach. Turned out the woman was a Pentecostal pastor from Indiana. She was about 30 years old. We talked for about half an hour, about faith... about the challenges of church life today. At the end, she thanked me for sharing my experience with her, she affirmed what she saw as my gifts for ministry, and encouraged the ongoing ministry that I have, assured me that people will continue to be blessed by what I do. It was touching. And then she prayed for me. A wonderful gift, a blessing, an affirmation and encouragement for me on my way. In that moment, and after, it felt like she was bearing God's word to me. What Rev. Laurie calls a God moment. I think they occur for any of us at times, if we have the eyes to see them and the courage of our faith to call them that. My takeaway is that God's OK with how I'm finding my way along The Way. But hold it lightly. Following the way helps you see it more clearly as the way unfolds.