If anyone is in Christ, behold! There is a new creation! Or so at least St Paul claims.

I don’t know about you, but I’m not so sure. I mean, the guy is a good rhetorician—I’ll grant him that. And he’s no theological slouch either. I suppose that’s why Christianity as we know it is essentially shaped on the anvil of his thought—preserved in letters like this one that he wrote. But he doesn’t seem to be an empiricist by any stretch of the imagination, for this seems to be a claim that is difficult to empirically verify. Rather, in fact, it might actually be easy to empirically falsify if you looked at the dataset of our lives: we, that is, who call ourselves Christians.

So much of what we hear about Christians seems only to be about their flabbergasting flaws and foibles. If you don’t know what I’m talking about, click the “Religion” section on your news app of choice. Every once in a while, you’ll find some incredible, inspiring story of some no-name, small-s saint doing astonishing work among the poor and vulnerable—and usually doing so in thankless obscurity (at least until a little media spotlight is shined). But more often you’ll find appalling scandal, insular infighting, gross ineptitude, internecine politics, glaring hypocrisy. Am I wrong?

A verse from the tune of a surfer-turned-singer-songwriter, Jack Johnson, often runs through my mind as I read the latest in religion news (or just news, for that matter):

Well you win, it's your show now  
So what's it gonna be  
'Cause people will tune in  
How many train wrecks do we need to see  
Before we lose touch  
We thought this was low  
It's bad getting worse so  
Where did all the good people go?  
I've been changing channels  
I don't see them  
On the TV shows  
Where did all the good people go?  
We got heaps and heaps of what we sow….  
Where did all the people go?  

It would be easy to blame the media here, but there’s a little too much of that going around these days—don’t you think?

Perhaps the media plays its role, but we humans—and, yes, we Christians—certainly provide our fair share of those aforementioned flabbergasting flaws and foibles, fodder for the news. It’s enough to make you want to give up, just stay home on Sunday morning with a warm cup of coffee and a NY Times crossword puzzle.

Indeed, Mahatma Gandhi is once said to have remarked: “I almost became a Christian… until I met one.” That, and the many versions thereof, is a quote I have never actually been able to track down to a reliable source, but he was indeed cited saying:

“I know of no one who has done more for humanity than Jesus. In fact, there is nothing wrong with Christianity…. The trouble is with you Christians. You do not begin to live up to your own teachings.”

---

I have thought that a more honest welcome brochure for this parish, any parish, might read: The Episcopal Church welcomes you. And stick around, we’re bound to disappoint! Hence why the Denver-based Lutheran pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber called her church plant the “House for All Sinners and Saints.”

And yet St Paul is so bold to claim: If anyone is in Christ, behold! There is a new creation! Everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!

His claim here, though, is not based on the verifiability of my integrity, consistency, or faithfulness (thanks be to God). Nor indeed yours (can I get an amen?). Which is not to say that we who claim to be Christians—or, better yet, disciples, that is, “students” and “followers” of Jesus—ought not to aspire to integrity, consistency, and faithfulness. We should. I should. Believe you me, I am ever mindful of my ordination vow when the Bishop asked me: “Will you do your best to pattern your life and that of your household in accordance with the teachings of Christ, so that you may be a wholesome example to your people?” “I will,” I responded feebly. And all I could think was: I will do my best.

But St Paul’s claim here this evening is not based on the verifiability of my life witness, or yours. We can and do indeed benefit or, conversely, undermine our message by the integrity, consistency, and faithfulness of our witness. And the wider “spiritual but not religious” world is as much a repudiation of our inability to live up to and live out the ideals we articulate and aspire to, as much as any specific doctrinal matter difficult to reason through.

Yet the basis of St Paul’s claim is not us and our witness. The basis of St Paul’s claim is Jesus. All, only, ever Jesus.

“If anyone is in Christ, behold!” St Paul says to his sisters and brothers in the church he helped plant in Corinth, “there is a new creation!” There is a new creation. Whether or not you see it, believe it. And not only is it true of the person you see in the mirror, but this entire world. Behold! Everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! Everything! Everything.

For, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself. The world that God had created. The world that rebelled from the very first and continues to rebel to this day. The world that, in our self-seeking rebellion, became estranged from God and God’s way of love—but never mind! Forget all that! Forget the fall, the rebellion, the curse, the sickness, the pain, the death, the decay, the so-called “freedom” our forebears chose in pursuing their own way, their own path to the knowledge of good and evil, turning their backs on all that all-perfect order that was already given to them… forget that rebellious seek-our-own-path-look-out-for-number-one spirit that still lives within us, still leads to the destruction and decay of this creation… forget all that! Never mind! Behold! In Christ, God was reconciling us, and indeed the whole of this world!

And behold, whether or not you see it in my life, or your own, or the life of your supposedly-Jesus-following neighbor to your right or left, whether or not you see it, behold, there is a new creation! God-in-Christ was already beginning to remake his world, to reconcile all that has gone estranged and awry, to make it all, to make you and me, new.

Behold, Jesus—God incarnate—was a seed planted to grow a new garden in this dry and barren land, this abandoned Eden. Behold, there is a new creation! See—if you can somehow perceive beyond our rangebound human point of view—everything has become new!

“All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation.”

God has, in Christ, already planted the seed. The great reversal has already begun, even if the “religion” section on your select news app—and every other section on any other news app, for that matter—suggests otherwise. What is given to us is simply to proclaim and partner in this work of reconciliation. To proclaim love in the face of hatred, peace in the face of discord, unity in the face of estrangement. To hear, believe, proclaim, and live as if God indeed has already won.

~ Amen ~