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Rector, The Nevil Memorial Church of St. George  
Ardmore, Pennsylvania  
Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany  
February 17, 2018

Lectionary Year C:  
Jeremiah 17:5-10  
1 Corinthians 15:12-20  
Luke 6:17-26  
Psalm 1

*The resurrected life and morals of Jesus of Nazareth*

A few weeks ago, there was an article in the paper by Simon Critchley, a professor of philosophy who has made the jump into popular writing.<sup>1</sup> The article was about a recent trip he made to the site of the ancient Academy in Athens, Greece. You might even call it a pilgrimage. The Academy dates back to the fourth-century BC. It was started by the philosopher Plato, more or less the founding thinker of the Western tradition. He himself was a student of Socrates and a teacher of Aristotle. It has been said (by Alfred North Whitehead) that all of philosophy is a footnote to Plato, and Plato's life and work was accomplished in what we now call the Platonic Academy, in the outskirts of Athens.

The Renaissance painter, Raphael, captured what we think those early, golden years of the Academy must have been like, in a fresco now decorating one of the walls of the Apostolic Palace in Rome. In the center of the fresco are two figures in deep conversation, identified as Plato and Aristotle. But around them are about two dozen other people in various states of arguing, listening, or thinking. One teacher has said facetiously that, since Plato was writing at the beginning of the tradition, he didn't know that philosophy was supposed to be dry and boring. Raphael's painting depicts a scene that is far from boring: there is a palpable energy to it, a visceral sense that what they were doing was of the utmost importance and that, for all the scowling, maybe they were even enjoying it.

But Critchley's article was not only about the dynamism of the Platonic Academy of the fifth-century BC. It was much more about its ruins in our twenty-first century. Critchley reports that the ground there was muddy; there was an empty playground nearby; the smell was unpleasant. In a surreal detail, almost everyone he saw was standing around enjoying recreational drugs. The subtitle of the article asks, "What books were in Plato's library and why is everyone getting wasted there?" Both answers are inconclusive.

In the centuries following the advent of Christianity, there was some interpretation of Jesus himself as a kind of philosopher of the Platonic kind. Christianity was born into a world that was in many ways culturally Greek; the New Testament itself was written in Greek. In this interpretation, his wisdom was of a particular kind, sure: it was strange, strongly Jewish, especially concerned with the poor, in a way that his Greek predecessors had not really been. But, read in a certain way, Jesus could be fit into a particular category—a teacher of ethics—as one member among others.

This interpretation of Jesus never really died out. There was a renaissance of it in the Renaissance; the deists of the eighteenth-century adopted something like it (an emphasis on teaching; a denial of the supernatural); plenty of people today hold it.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/06/opinion/athens-plato-academy.html>

Thomas Jefferson, for example, wrote two books of religion along these lines. The first was called *The Philosophy of Jesus of Nazareth*; there aren't any extant copies of that one. The second was titled, *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*, in which he literally cut and pasted passages from the New Testament into a new document, including those passages that he found amenable and exciting those he didn't. What he found in the text he had constructed was, as he put it, "the most sublime and benevolent code of morals which has never been offered to man."

One of the main places you could find this sublime and benevolent code was in what we call the Beatitudes, one version of which constitutes our gospel reading for today. In front of multitudes, Jesus teaches, "Blessed are you who are poor. ... Blessed are you who are hungry. ... Woe to you who are rich. ... Woe to you who are full."

This privileging of the underprivileged; this valuing of the undervalued; this expectation of the righteous suffering; this discomfort with too much comfort: it remains a persistent challenge for those who seek to live an ethical Christian life. It goes against what I'd consider to be perfectly natural inclinations toward comfort, security, approval, and all the things that money can buy.

There just is a real discomfort in the New Testament with being wealthy. It's not intrinsically bad, necessarily; it's more like it's just dangerous. There runs throughout the sense that being well-off puts you in a really tenuous position, vis a vis living the Christian life; the temptations are just too great. It's like the person on a diet working in a candy store, or the alcoholic working in a bar. It's not that resisting is impossible; there are a few people recorded in the scriptures themselves as having done it. It's just that it would be really hard for a lot of people, and maybe it's just better to avoid it if possible.

The life and morals of Jesus—as Jefferson put it—encourages significant self-sacrifice of various kinds, for the good of others and the glory of God, and that's not easy to do. The life of virtue is a life of challenge, or at least it looks that way from the outside. It may also be the good life, but it's only good in the sense that Good Friday is good—in fact, almost exactly the way that Good Friday is good. And even Jesus found Good Friday a challenge. It's no wonder the rest of us would, too.

Yet, somehow, it isn't all just endless struggle. It isn't all grim determination and grueling effort. On the contrary, many of the most faithful Christian lives one sees are often marked by joy, celebration, and thanksgiving. Joy, even in the midst of everything else.

And that is because there has been one event in history that is the foundation of all that joy, and celebration, and thanksgiving; an event that is the basis of God's promise; that is the assurance of the covenant; that gives us hope for the future, the only hope for the future: the fact that Christ has been raised from the dead.

After the self-sacrifice of Good Friday, dying to save others, at the seeming lowest point of the world, early one morning, on the first day of the week, the living Christ appeared to Mary Magdalene, then the apostles, then to many more. If it wasn't so, the future wouldn't be bright, and so neither would the present. St. Paul writes to the Corinthians, as we heard earlier, "If Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. ... [and] we are of all people most to be pitied." But, as he wrote to the Romans, "We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him" (6:9). But this isn't only about him. Because it doesn't have dominion over him (he tells the Corinthians), it doesn't have dominion over us, either.

This is the message to the Corinthians. Because Christ was raised from the dead, we then have been given the promise of being raised on the last day, too, and we can live lives of joyful expectation. Then, the sacrifices called for in the Beatitudes and elsewhere—the lives and morals—don't have to be matters of dismal obligation. They are rather opportunities to live Christ-like lives

so that, having died like Christ, we can live Christ-like resurrections, too. That when we have died—as we all will—we can then be raised to everlasting life with God, through his gracious promise.

And this is what Plato didn't know (which is not his fault), and it's what Thomas Jefferson left out. Jefferson's Bible ends with Jesus in the tomb. But had Jesus stayed in the tomb forever, we wouldn't be here like this—you and I, literally. After Jesus appeared to all those people, they weren't afraid of death anymore. (I think this is the best argument for the bodily resurrection.) Whatever happened, in whatever way it happened, the people who saw it wouldn't stop talking about it, wouldn't stop joyfully celebrating it, even when—and especially when—they were told that they had to stop at the pain of death. They had gone from depression to ecstasy; from sorrow to joy; and they weren't afraid of death anymore. They had seen, with their own eyes, that there was life after death for him; and they had been promised, from the mouth of the one who was raised, that there was life after death possible for them, too. And they wouldn't stop talking about it.

We can say, with the great tradition, that we don't know how, exactly, the bodily resurrection happened—none of the gospel writers go into any detail—but whatever it was, the effect was that people felt so much joy after meeting the risen Christ that they were never the same again. That primitive church spread out into the Mediterranean, then farther, then farther still, filling the face of the earth with their hymns, singing of the good news of resurrection life. They sing still, and we sing along with them, because Christ was raised from the dead and he is alive today.

Simon Critchley found the Platonic Academy deserted on his trip to Athens. Meanwhile, at this very moment, Jerusalem and its environs are filled with crowds. They kiss the ground; they cry tears of joy; they are, mostly, sober. Because early one morning, on the first day of the week, the shackles of death were thrown off of Jesus of Nazareth. So we can follow him in his self-sacrificial life; we can follow him into his self-sacrificial death; because we can follow him, by his grace, into everlasting life.