

An Unexpected "Judgment"

It was 1990. Our son, who at the age of three had wanted to run away to California, at the age of 20, ran away to Heaven, instead. A few months after the motorcycle accident, I too felt the need to get away, so I went to visit a friend in England; and since I'd never been in that part of the world, I decided to take a bus tour of Europe.

I went alone. I wanted to meet no one...have no particular experience...no ties...and, above all, no hurt. Instead of boarding a bus in Chicago at age 4, I boarded a bus in England at age 48...and, just as before, I managed to "stay away" for almost an entire day.

After the first evening's supper, I went straight to my room to read. But, in a short while, I began to yearn for a nice hot cup of tea; so, I went down to the dining area and bar, where I could put in my order. I was told that I'd have to wait a bit, that they needed to boil the water; and while I waited, a number of people from the bus tour spotted me. In spite of my protests, I was herded back to their table, and there I sat and listened to the conversation already in progress, figuring that as soon as I got my tea, I could...with all due politeness...leave.

"So you see," said one member of the group, who had obviously been telling a story to the rest of those at the table, "I know that I will go to Hell...because anyone who lies to a priest has committed a mortal sin."

Perhaps because he thought that I needed some kind of explanation for such a statement, he proceeded to tell me his story:

Apparently, this man had married a woman with whom he was very much in love. After they had a child, his wife fell in love with another man and wanted a divorce so she could remarry. Since divorce was out of the question in their particular church, she needed an annulment in order to do this.

It was obvious that with a young child, she couldn't claim that she and her husband hadn't shared the marriage bed. However, if her husband would swear to the church hierarchy that he had not loved his wife when he married her, then the marriage could be annulled and the wife would be free to marry someone else.

Now, the man (telling the story) loved his wife very much...so much, in fact, that he wanted her to be happy at all costs...so, he lied to those who had the power to determine their future status as man and wife. He said that he had never loved her at all. The annulment was granted and she was free to do as she pleased.

And he was left with the sure and certain belief that he would go to hell, because, he had been taught at a very early age that to lie to an official of the church is unforgivable, a mortal sin.

I couldn't believe it! Perhaps my patience at the time was at a low point, but something inside of me exploded, and before I could stop myself, I blurted out,

“For crying out loud, who do you listen to?! God or Man?!”

Suddenly, there was a disturbing silence in the room as everyone turned to listen...

“Why...God, of course! But, you have to understand, I was raised in that particular church. Don't get me wrong, I'm no dummy; I've been well educated (I even have a doctorate), but what you know as *fact* and what you *believe* are two different things. When you've been raised in a particular faith, logic has little to do with it; what you've been taught to believe is always there...whether you want it to be or not. There's always that doubt...”

Luckily, my cup of tea was delivered and I was spared from making any more comments or asking any more silence-producing questions. With a slow shake of my head...perhaps at the disbelief of human gullibility...perhaps in disgust at the audacity with which any church could condemn this man...or anyone, at all, for that matter...I excused myself and went to my room.

I did not ask God about this conversation. In fact, I didn't ask Him anything at all (I was in, what might be called, a really, really bad mood). However, God chose to make His own thoughts known, perhaps because the man telling the story had avowed, without any doubt, to Whom he would listen:

“Why...God, of course!”

So, just as I had shut the bedroom door behind me...and before I had even put my tea on the end table, I was frozen in place...a clear and time-stopping vision before me:

I saw three crosses on a hill and three men hanging from these crosses. The face of the man in the middle drew closer...and larger...until I realized that I was looking at the face of the man who had lied to the priest.

Then a Voice, in Power and Love, spoke:

“Because he has been numbered among the transgressors, all for the sake of love, he has followed in Jesus' footsteps.”

I knew, without any doubt that this man was not going to hell...and that he needed to be told so. I rushed back down to the bar, but found that the room was now empty; apparently, I had cleared out the entire room with my question...and my exit. There was nothing more that I could do that evening.

The next morning at breakfast, however, I saw the man sitting by himself, and I went over, asked if I could join him, and—without waiting for an answer—sat down. (Now, I have to tell you, dear reader, that it isn't easy telling someone that you've had a vision...and that you've heard a message from God. I hadn't asked for it...didn't want it...and certainly didn't want to ruin my trip by giving the impression that I was crazy, especially not on the 2nd day of a two-week trip...but, some things just have to be done.)

“What I'm going to say to you will probably make you think I'm crazy...and that's alright. If you want to think that, you can. You don't have to comment. You don't even have to talk to me for the rest of the trip, but you have to hear what I've come to say. Last night after I left you...”

And I proceeded to tell him about the vision and what God had said. When I was finished, I rose to leave; but before I could go, he laid a hand on top of mine and said, quietly and sincerely, “Thank you.” And I knew that this was the real reason I'd come on the trip: so that this man would *know*, without any doubt, that he had nothing to fear from God. The church may have *locked the doors of Heaven* to this man, but there is no door that God can't open...with or without a key.

We are not always judged as we think that we, and others, deserve. Little children tend to judge themselves much more harshly than do the adults who are in charge of them...and we are all children in the sight of God. This, however, does not mean that we should lie to anyone. It does not mean that divorce is OK. It means that only God can look into the heart of a person and, therefore, only God is the righteous judge.

And, in the End, that is all that matters.