

19 October, 2014

Living the Good Life

Scripture lessons: Genesis 18:15-33; Matthew 5:1-10, 6:1-4, 19-21

In late August posters appeared in the windows of the fraternity house across the corner from my place, announcing their Eureka week (in American parlance, “rush week”) and its theme (in English no less), “Living the Good Life”. Maybe they hoped to attract some of the increasing number of foreign students in the English language programmes at Erasmus University, or maybe it is just that the cultural dominance of English gives the slogan more cachet: the “good life” of a fraternity bro will seem even more attractive if it is advertised in an international language. At any rate, it did not take long for the rest of us in the neighbourhood to discover what this “good life” consisted of: their parties start on Thursday evening and basically run non-stop through Sunday evening. They would probably run seven days, except that it takes a couple of days to restock with the beer that is necessary to fuel the bros. But although you can get drunk as a skunk, you are evidently not allowed to smoke indoors: that has to be done out on the roof deck, or down on the street outside the house. And it is there that the real *pièce-de-resistance* takes place: the projectile vomiting, or “hurling” (not to be mistaken for the Gaelic sport). That’s also blown in from American university culture: a brother loudly announces “Gotta hurl, man!”, warning everybody to stand clear, and then attempts to vomit as far as he can. The other morning when I went out to do my papers at 4:00 a.m., there was a magnificent specimen of alcohol and oriental take-away a full two metres long up the middle of the street. Such is the “good life” as defined (and lived) by members of Rotterdam Student Vereniging. But you can count me out. In fact, it may make me a grumpy old man, but I am somewhat relieved that I will probably be gone long before these future leaders of The Netherlands (and given the international contingent, the world), educated by Erasmus U., known for its economics and poli-sci faculties, get their hands on the levers of power.

You can also count me out on another definition of the “good life” – much more ubiquitous than the Kralingense version, in that it dominates our whole global culture today. It is constructed around what you acquire and possess, rather than what you disperse – well, except for the money dispersed in the process of acquiring. This “good life” is defined by the things you own – for most of us, particularly electronic gadgets, i-phones, smart phones, tablets, e-readers, Google glasses, but also fashion, cars, and for the lucky few yachts will also do. Paradoxically, in a day when philosophers and social thinkers remind us that we no longer have any consistent identities – we no longer have a job or profession for life; with divorce and remarriage, our families (and our roles in them) are constantly breaking up and re-forming, so our roles and relations there blur; more and more of us move from region to region and country to country, blurring our national and cultural identities – in

a day when all identities are up for grabs, we still have one constant “identity” imposed on us: that of consumer. That is so much so that some commentators have argued it is a major contributor to the breakdown of the family: the family is no longer the consuming unit, but each and every member is now targeted by advertising individually. And increasingly we no longer relate to other people, except through our things. That is quite literal, as we replace our friends with “Friends” on Facebook and its imitators – friends who, chances are, we have never met and may not even know. The epitome of the whole process, to my mind, was the affair this last year surrounding the ING Bank’s proposal to start selling information about your (digital) banking transactions to advertisers, who could then target you with their advertisements, tailored to precisely what you were buying at that moment. In the kerfluffle that followed, ING explained that we should in fact welcome this – far be it from them to have any mercenary intentions in selling information about us! They were merely acting for our own good, because it would make our lives richer and better to receive such directed advertising, for the things on which we were spending our money at that moment. But this sort of directed – actually, directing – advertising goes even farther. Although I’m told it also happens with electronic gadgets and fashion bought through internet, I’ve noted it particularly when I buy books on the web: the moment you complete a transaction on Amazon or other such services, you immediately confronted by a pop-up advertisement saying ‘People who have bought this book have also bought...’ - or perhaps even more intrusively, ‘If you like this book, you will also like...’ Who do they think they are, telling me what I will like? Classically, advertising is supposed to introduce us to new things we might want to buy; this sort of directed advertising has the opposite intent: it hopes to sell us more of the same shit. Not only are we reduced from human beings to consumers, but we are then narrowed down to consumers of the familiar, the known, the safe. Let nothing new, no new experience, enter our lives! That is a rich life? That is a good life? No way.

In the light of all the violence across the world this past summer, and the news about the spread of ebola, my son remarked to me that it almost seemed as though the epidemic might be God’s way of saying that he was sick and tired of this mess, and preparing to wash His hands of the whole human experiment. At the moment, I replied rather sardonically that ebola could not be the instrument He would use: God promised to Noah that he would not destroy life again, and I quoted Langston Hughes’ “And God gave Noah the rainbow sign:/ no more water, but the fire next time.” It was only afterwards, on reflecting about our conversation, that I realized I should also have said something about the Lamed Vovniks.

The what? The Lamed Vavniks, in Judaism – or in Islam, the kutb. The Thirty Six. The 36 righteous men for whose sake God will not destroy the world.

To begin with the name. Hebrew has no numbers; it counts with letters of the alphabet, each of which also has a numerical value. In the year MMXIV that may seem strange to us, with our Arabic numerals (which incidentally are something for which we may be extremely thankful to Arab culture, as it is quite difficult to add or subtract – “minder, minder”! – and well-nigh impossible to multiply with Roman numerals). But in Hebrew the letter lamed (our L) is 30, and the letter vav is 6; added together, they make 36. That is also the basis of the whole concept of Kabbala, or Jewish mystic numerology and exegesis: if each letter has a value, then each word has a value; if you add up the sum of the letters, those values have symbolic meanings, and you can substitute one word for another with the same value, and develop endless speculations. The “-nik” is the Yiddish suffix meaning “ones”, as in “beatniks”.

The idea is that there are 36 righteous men – there are, and always will be – for whose sake God will not destroy the world. It is not directly biblical, although, as the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges points out in his article on them, it is rooted in two Old Testament stories: obviously, the story of Noah, the one blameless man of his time, who walked with God, who was spared in the Flood (Gen. 6:9), and the story of God and Abraham bargaining about the fate of Sodom, almost like two farmers at a cattle market, which we read this morning. “Do you really intend to sweep away good and bad together? Suppose there are fifty good men in the city...” “OK, if I find fifty...” “Well, suppose there are five short of fifty...” “OK, forty-five...” “Suppose there's only forty...” “OK, for forty...” “What about thirty...” “OK, thirty...” “What about twenty...” “OK, OK, twenty...” “Suppose ten can be found there...” “For the sake of ten I won't do it.” You can almost see them slapping hands to close the deal.

How does this tie in with our theme of the good life today? Well, what is it about the 36 Righteous Men that so pleases God? What is the good life, in God's eyes, that they are living, for the sake of which He spares the world?

The first thing – and I'm sorry about this, ladies – is that they are men. Women cannot be included in the 36 – at least traditionally. You see, religions have this thing with sexism...

On the more positive side, they are poor. While, as Harry Emerson Fosdick put it in his hymn “God of Grace and God of Glory”, we may be “rich in things and poor in soul”, the 36 are rich in soul and poor in things. They are not to be found among the wealthy, because, as the Psalmist put it in Psalm 37, which we also used this morning, “they are ever giving liberally and lending”. They are not surrounded by things. They live a simple life. They engage in quiet charity. This is not the charity of founding charitable institutions, or of endowing cathedrals (I am reminded of the inscription on Riverside Church in upper Manhattan, “In memory of God, and in honor of John D. Rockefeller” -

or was it the other way around, “In honor of God, and in memory of John D. Rockefeller”? There is a whole discourse we could have about the virtues poverty, at least if it is self-chosen; suffice it to say that I find it obnoxious when the rich lecture those who have less about what a burden wealth is, and how the poor should be happy they don't bear it.

Interestingly, according to the tradition nobody knows who the Thirty Six are. Not even they themselves. They do not know each other. Their piety and charity is not so outstanding, it is practiced so quietly, that others are in awe of it. Nor are they themselves ever aware of their role in sustaining the world; some commentators suggest that if it might ever happen that the thought crossed their mind that they are among the Thirty Six, they are immediately disqualified. They are humble. What they do is natural. One cannot set out to be a Lamed Vavnik. As Borges writes, “[They] are the secret pillars of the universe... Unawares, they are our saviors.”

Finally, according to the tradition, when one passes away, someone else, somewhere else in the world, immediately replaces him; such is the grace of God.

They, in the eyes of God, live the good life.

Now, it is interesting that Judaism has the Thirty Six, and Islam, on the other side, has the kutb, the exact equivalent – but Christianity, in the middle, does not. I've puzzled over why that should be, that they drop out in Christianity. I suspect probably it has something – maybe a whole lot – to do with the Christian belief that the world is saved by the salvific work of one man, Christ, rather than its judgement being stayed by a group of men. Alternatively, it could also be that all Christians are expected to live in that way. For the outline of the good life that Jesus provides in the Sermon on the Mount looks very much like the lifestyle of the Thirty Six. As our New Testament reading this morning we had a catena of passages from the Sermon: blessed are the humble in spirit, for they shall inherit the earth; do your charity so that not even your left hand knows what your right hand is doing; do not store up treasures on earth, but store up treasure in heaven – for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. No, Christianity does not suggest that such things save the world – note, the meek will 'inherit', not 'save' the earth! - but that does not detract in any way from the truth that in the eyes of God, this is the truly good life. And there have been a comparative handful of Christians in every age who perversely, against the grain of a world marked by materialism, wealth, power, pomp and pride, even in the Church, have attempted to realize this in practice – from St. Francis of Assisi to the Shakers, whose “Simple Gifts” we will use at the end of this service.

Let us have our Eureka-moment: you are invited to “Live the Good Life”.