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PHOTO: CHRIST CARRYING THE CROSS, OIL ON CANVAS BY TITIAN, 1565, MADRID MUSEO NACIONAL DEL PRADO

POSTSCRIPT

PRAYING AS THE WORLD CHANGES

ASKING GOD FOR PATIENCE IN HARD TIMES

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What does healthy discontent with the church look like?

I've been rolling that question around in my mind for the last few months, discussing it with others close to me. In some ways, the question has been spurred by the COVID-19 pandemic: for each person I know who is satisfied with the response offered (or not offered) by the church, I find someone eager to lament the choices made by their priest, their parish council, their diocese, their ecclesiastical province or their denomination. Some are hurt, some are bitter, some are rebellious and some cry out for change.

In other words, the more things change, the more they stay the same. Discontent with the church, especially in times of trial, isn't exactly new. I think often of the Israelites' complaints to Moses as they continued their

exodus from captivity: "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food" (Numbers 21:5). (I always imagine them signing air quotes around that miserable "food.")

God sent venomous snakes to the Israelites to respond to their discontent, which awoke them to their pettiness and became a symbol of healing.

I don't know that we've quite reached that point with the novel coronavirus, climate change or the myriad other apocalyptic snakes that slither at our feet, but I am starting to think that my own discontent with the church has tended toward the unhealthy—and that perhaps that discontent blinds me both to what I have and to misfortune I've managed to avoid. Perhaps you can relate.

So, how do we distinguish a thirst for change from discontentedness? And is there a difference?

I don't purport to have answers to these questions, but they seem important ones to ask as the church undertakes a process of strategic planning. In my conversation with Bishop of Saskatchewan Michael Hawkins for the "North and South" article in this issue of *Epiphanies*, he suggested that we tend to approach decision-making in the church with an "everything's on the table" mentality and find out very quickly that little is on the table—that we may struggle to agree upon the scope and nature of changes we'd like to make.

As the Anglican Church of Canada tries to imagine a future that is presently unimaginable, I'm inclined to believe that we will all see—and perhaps experience—discontent as plans and ideas emerge in response to a rapidly changing, increasingly ailing world. How will we assess the church's choices as old certainties fall away? Opinions will vary dramatically. Too much will be on the table or far too little. We'll be losing the baby with the bathwater, or we'll be forgetting to get rid of the tub, too. We'll be cutting off our nose to spite our face, or we'll fall short of envisioning a totally new face of the church. We're going to hear it all.

How we process these feelings as they arise within our congregations and within our own minds, I think, may determine the shape of the church far more than any strategic plan. How will we respond to the emergence of a new plan, especially if we don't like parts of it? Will we forgive church leaders, fellow Christians and our neighbours when things don't go as we'd like? How many times will we forgive? How many changes and failures to change will we endure?

In a small faith-sharing group in which I participate, we recently discussed the First Epistle of Peter. Upon re-reading this passage, I felt I finally had

my answer to the question of healthy discontent:

The end of all things is near; therefore be serious and discipline yourselves for the sake of your prayers. Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins. Be hospitable to one another without complaining. Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received. Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God; whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies, so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ. To him belong the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen. (1 Peter 4:7-11)

This strikes me as both guidance and prayer, useful as a loving reminder and powerful as a personal petition. Can there be any healthier way to express your discontent than through a prayer to be filled with kindness, generosity and sobriety, all in the name of Jesus Christ? So, I pray:

Dear God, the world seems to be spinning out of control. Keep me alert and disciplined in my prayers. More than anything, help me live in constant, redeeming love for everybody. Let my hospitality be endless, generous and without complaint. Make my tongue, my hands and my heart a conduit for the light of Jesus Christ, the source of all goodness. Amen.

Whether the end of all things is near or we've merely met the serpents of our time, God calls us to patience, faithfulness and forgiveness. Wherever the church is headed and however frustrated we might become along the way, let us pray that God would keep us on our most important path of all: the way of Jesus Christ. ■