

Companions on the Journey

June 13, 2021

Dear Friends,

Ever hear of a fellow named Pelagius? Or the Pelagian Heresy? Or Semi-Pelagian? No? I didn't think so. But he was an interesting guy. He lived at the end of the fourth century and beginning of the fifth century (late 300's, early 400's). He hailed from the British Isles but whether he was English or Scot or Irish is unclear. He was smart and trained theologically in Latin and Greek. He was a Monk; we would say today he was a Brother Monastic as opposed to an ordained Monk. He lived in Rome for a long time and both taught and published.

What did he teach? Well he taught about Jesus and who he was and about sin and what it is and about freedom and how it works. His teaching was eventually condemned by the Council of Carthage as deficient in certain aspects. What was the issue? Well, Jesus was a wonderful person, a good man, a man of faith and good example. If any of us simply imitated Jesus we could save ourselves. Our own freedom, something with which we are endowed from the beginning as human beings, is actually intact and does not experience any corruption from "original sin."

Pelagius lived an austere life. He was much influenced by the Roman Stoic philosophers. Lead a disciplined life and follow the example of great men like Jesus and you can live the truly just life. In other words, you can do it on your own. You do not really need anyone to save you, or endow you with the Spirit of the living God. Jesus does not have to be divine. Other than his example and his personal life, we don't really need Jesus at all.

I go into this because I think there is a lot of this kind of thinking going on today. It was very popular too back in the time of Pelagius and Saint Augustine. There were bishops, priests and ordinary folk who believed in Pelagius and accepted his teaching. Self-sufficiency. Independence. Self-reliance. There were also many in the Church who saw this as a distortion to the truth of the Gospel, namely that Jesus is the son of God and came specifically to do that for us which we were not able to do for ourselves. To save us from our sins. Not to condemn us yes, we are free. But we need the empowerment of the Spirit, we need the grace poured out from the Son of God on the cross to enable us and empower us.

Many Catholics today tend to think along Pelagian lines. "I got this." "I'm basically a good person." "I can discipline myself and lead a truly authentic life pretty much on my own." "I have my act together. I love this planet. I eat and drink organically. I am aware of and alert to those things that are truly important. I don't really need to be gathering with others except those who think like me." Thinking that way, does gathering with other believers in Jesus to celebrate Eucharist even make sense? Or, do I really need to have my children "baptized into Christ" if Christ is not really necessary to my living here on earth?

BUT. What about death? Can I beat death? Can I prevent myself from dying? Is there really a heaven? And if there is, does it matter how I live here in order to enter there? And, am I able to "do it on my own?" If there isn't a heaven does that mean that this is all there is? Do you see the impact of not believing in Jesus? There are still many unanswered questions. Does Jesus make all the difference in my life—or not? Do I need the Holy Spirit—or not? Is there a kingdom of God that lasts forever as Jesus taught—or not? And if you are tempted to say, "Who cares if there is nor not?" Then what do you say about death and what do you say about suffering and what do you say about the systemic evil in this world and do we not need some "divine" assistance to deliver us? My friends, the message of Jesus was attacked in many different ways over the centuries. The dismissal of Christ presently though is not new. No. It is very, very old. And the gates of hell shall not prevail over the truth of the Good News of Jesus Christ—in its fullness. We, in twenty-first century America, are tempted to think that we don't really need anything more than ourselves. And that kind of thinking—will not end well.

In the Peace of Christ,

Msgr. McHenry