

This past week ended a long scheduled vacation, but since I am not yet able to play golf, reading was a major pass-time. I completed a truly awesome and, frankly, obscure in this country, novel translated into English because written in Polish by a Pole about a Hungarian who was at the Hungarian Embassy in India at the time of the 1956 Hungarian uprising — which, as a thirteen-year-old eighth-grader had me enthralled — and though he had a wife and sons back in Budapest, this Hungarian had an affair with an Australian eye-doctor who wanted him to go back to Australia with her. Quite a bit of “world communion” in all that. But this was actually a novel with Christian faith at its core: the Hungarian did not go with the Australian because of the religious significance of his marital vows. But a part of this book takes place some weeks after the Hungarian uprising, at Christmas time, when the hero attends a Christmas Eve service.

A Christmas Eve service in Hindu India?

Well, yes. As some of you know, a fascinating part of my early business career involved my going to India a total of ten times over two and one-half years in connection with the construction and start-up of a fertilizer plant in what once was the Portuguese enclave of Goa, which almost does not show on this map. Goa was, until 1962, a Portuguese territory; Vasco da Gama had landed there, Portugal later established a colony — one sees many names of Portuguese origin among Indians, — and St. Francis Xavier died there — his remains are shown to the public, or at least used to be shown about every ten years, and, in an attempt to promote tourism, were shown once when I was there. The main reason they were shown from time to time was to display the “miracle” of their preservation, though what I saw was not very convincing.

St. Francis Xavier and the Portuguese were of course Roman Catholic, but the first Christian I encountered in the overwhelmingly Hindu nation of India was neither Roman Catholic nor any of the branches of which we normally think. The managing director of the fertilizer company in which I was involved was a Christian from the state of Kerala, the site of the novel’s Christmas Eve service, where legend has it that Christianity was brought to India in the first Christian, or “Common Era,” century by Thomas the Doubter,

the one who wanted to see the holes from the nails in Jesus' hands. The Christianity in Kerala is essentially *Coptic* Christianity, of which I shall say more in just a moment.

While Christianity is not under any real threat in India, which upon its independence almost seventy years ago prided itself on religious tolerance because of the large Muslim minority, the ascendance of Hindu nationalism has nonetheless put a damper on Christianity's growth there and on religious tolerance.

That basic form of Christianity in Kerala, Coptic, is the predominant form of Christianity in Egypt. Egypt, the Sinai peninsula, and Ethiopia further down on the African continent were places in which early Christianity thrived, and Egypt and the school in Alexandria gave us some of Christianity's early leaders, such as Origen, but for at least twenty years, Egypt has put limits on the construction of churches and church expansion due to pressure from some Muslims. Egypt at least was considered the center of Islamic religious education and thought, but of course, it is also the locus of much of the "Muslim Brotherhood" movement that was actually democratically elected to lead the country, but then overthrown in what is euphemistically referred to as "the Arab Spring."

So Christians in Egypt are almost strangers in their own land; there is certainly, if not persecution, harassment. They are not like exiles in Babylon, but times are, frankly, not so good for them, despite what appears to be some defense from President El Sisi.

Egypt, of course, is in that part of the world in which the three Abrahamic religions — Christianity, Judaism, and Islam — arose, what we call "the Middle East," which is very much in the news. Earlier this past week, I saw online — which means it must be true — that to the consternation of the church in Iraq, a group, one of several, is helping Christians to flee Iraq, where, though Christians have lived there for almost two thousand years, the existence of ISIL presents an existential threat to their community, a threat of being extinguished by violence,.

And what a community — centered, I believe, near Nineveh, up in the area of Mosul. When Patricia and I lived in Chicago, I took some courses where once a week I parked in a garage owned by some Iraqi — Christian immigrants; Iraqi Christians are about the only people who still speak Aramaic, the language Jesus himself spoke.

So in Iraq, Christians are in grave danger, in places such as Egypt and India they are under different types of hostile opposition, and of course, in China, the government fears the spread of Christianity and does what it can — confining churches to houses — to dampen it without formally banning it.

I mention these examples today not to give geography lessons, but for two reasons: first, this is *World Communion Sunday*, when Christians throughout the world, including in Iraq and Egypt and India and China — and Japan, where I once celebrated the day, — as well as in more than one hundred other countries, are sharing the bread of life and the cup of salvation, even if not in the exact same manner or with the same exact understanding. We are not alone in what we are doing today; hundreds of millions of Christians are gathered at the table with us.

And I mention them also because, while many U.S. Christians are frustrated by what we perceive as government and social and media hostility to our faith, and do feel ourselves in somewhat of being “besieged by Babylon” or in a “Babylonian captivity,” there are Christians around the world for whom their existence more closely rivals that of Israel — Judah — under assault by the Babylonians or in exile in Babylon, the topic of our four readings from the Hebrew Bible.

But the message I hope we can take from those readings — Jeremiah’s optimism that there would be a time when one could again buy and sell property in Judah, the writer of Lamentation’s declaration of God’s faithfulness — I hope we can take from these readings that our brothers and sisters in Christianity around the world can hope for a better tomorrow.

Part of their hope lies in our being connected to them, connected to them through Jesus, through our redeemer, supporting them with our prayers, and, if necessary, our material gifts. The Christian Church does not wage war against nations in the conventional way, but we can hope always in the power of God we see in Christ and that we are called to display to the world.

And just as entire nationalities of Christians may feel themselves under assault or in exile, so we as *individual* Christians can feel ourselves in exile and in despair. I want first to speak in the sense of individual congregations that are aware of their — our — decline over time and fear for their — our — futures, and add that just as the hope for Christians of those nationalities I named in part lies in their connection to us, our hope lies in part in our connection as individual congregations to one another, a connection in and through that same Jesus Christ that should be more important than our connection to any individual congregation., to any individual church or building.

But I want also to speak of how we as individuals, as singular individuals, can know despair or heartache or depression, can know personal assault by, or exile and captivity in, figurative Babylon's. Our hope, too, lies in knowing that we are not alone. We are not alone because we are connected to Christ, and through him, Jesus Christ binds us to *individual* Coptics and Catholics, Iraqis and Indians and Italians, even to Norwegians (the Swede in him reluctantly acknowledges), who might be suffering the same sense of despair. We are never alone; we are never without hope, for even when we are left no hope in *this* world, we know that the promise of resurrection to the Kingdom of God is a promise in which we can believe.

Universality and hope, brotherhood and sisterhood with all believers and knowledge that at the end God through Christ delivers us, frees us from spiritual and physical and mental exile and captivity and delivers us into His kingdom. Those are the messages I believe Jesus would want us to hear as we gather around his table with Christians throughout the world to celebrate the mystery of our faith that we shall again proclaim, Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.

Or as one Jewish scholar says, and his support is Jesus' own words in the Gospel of John, "resurrection is not something that Jesus does, resurrection is something that Jesus is."

And Jesus does come again, and He is with us as we gather at His table. And in His name, Amen.