

About 18 years ago on our first cruise to Mexico I picked up this little onyx statue, a little copy of a Mayan idol, a Chacmool. This is just a small one. The real ones are about 6 feet long and are more or less life-size (picture).



Chacmool is actually a pretty popular guy in Mexico. You see him in Cozumel, and Cancun, and the Yucatan. You see original ancient statues of him in the ruins of ancient temples. But he also pops up in modern reproductions in towns, and on the beach. I think he's popular because of his posture. He's lying on his back, and it looks like he's relaxing. It looks like he might even be on the beach soaking up some rays. He looks like your friendly neighborhood Mayan sunbather.

But these Chacmool statues are not just works of art. They are idols. In fact, they have built-in altars. A Chacmool is always holding a plate or a bowl that functions as an altar. More on that in minute.

So why do I have this copy of a Chacmool in my office? Why does a Christian priest own a pagan idol? Two reasons actually. One's a little silly. And the other is deadly serious.

The silly reason has to do with a Chacmool's function. It's a little morbid, but since it's close to Halloween, I'll chance it. The Mayan priests, and later Aztec priests would offer human sacrifice in the following way. They took a human victim, and quickly opened up their chest with an obsidian knife. Then they removed the victim's beating heart and plopped it down in the bowl the Chacmool is holding. And the whole trick for the priest was to work so quickly that the heart was still beating by the time it hit the bowl.

What's silly about that? Well, it's a reminder to me that if I think my job as an Episcopal priest is stressful, think how tough it is to be a Mayan or Aztec priest. You've got to move fast to get a beating heart laid on the altar. And if you're not fast enough, if you botch the job, then you might get sacrificed yourself. Your heart might be the next one on the altar. That's pressure for a Mayan priest. My job's nowhere near that tough. That's reason #1 that I keep this little Chacmool around.

But reason #2 is deadly serious. I keep this Chacmool around as a warning. That's because the Chacmool serves as a perfect reminder to me of what Paul is saying in our Epistle lesson: 2nd Timothy chapters 3 & 4.

Our lesson from 2 Timothy contains two vital and interrelated messages. The first is found at the end of ch3. The second at the beginning of ch4.

The first message is about Holy Scripture. Today we have the famous 2Timothy 3:16. Not quite as famous as John 3:16. But pretty famous nonetheless. 2Timothy 3:16 "All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness."

"All scripture is inspired by God". Literally, "all scripture is 'God-breathed.'"

Is Paul talking about his own letters? No, that'd be a circular argument. Paul is talking about the Hebrew Scriptures, what we call the Old Testament. But for Christians the analogy could certainly be extended to the New Testament as well.

In 2Timothy, Paul claims that Holy Scripture is inspired. Not necessarily inerrant or infallible, but certainly inspired. In other words, God breathed his Holy Spirit into the human authors of the books of the Bible, and that God still speaks to us through those words today. That's why when we read from scripture during worship, we say, "The Word of the Lord."

Yes, the words of scripture are composed and recorded by fallible human beings. Yes, they are human words. But somehow, through the mysterious workings of the Holy Spirit, the words of scripture are also inspired by God. That's Paul's message.

And that's all very well and good. God had a hand in scripture. Very nice. But Paul ups the ante. The stakes are much higher than that.

Paul says to Timothy, "But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus."¹

In other words, you know the sacred writings, you know the scriptures. They have the power to bring you to salvation in Jesus Christ. So hang on to them. Continue. Be firm. Believe their message. Don't write them off. Stick with what you learned and believed.

And what is it scripture teaches? Paul says that scripture is useful in "showing us truth, exposing our rebellion, correcting our mistakes, training us to live God's way."²

That's so important. Why? Paul tells us in ch4: "For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths."³

Paul is saying, 'Stick with what you've learned. Trust and believe in the message of the inspired Word of God. For the time is coming when people will reject the truth and look for easy answers that suit their own inclinations. They'll be looking for people who will tell them and teach them exactly what they want to hear.'

¹ 2Tim 3:14-15

² 2Tim 3:16, *The Message* paraphrase

³ 2Tim 4:3-4

Paul is saying, in such a context, stick with what you've learned and firmly believe it.

And that's why I keep Chacmool around. As a warning.

You see, a Chacmool was not originally a Mayan idol. It was Toltec. Originally the Mayans were more peaceful in their worship. Yes, they offered blood in sacrifice to their gods. But the earlier Mayans would offer their own blood.

Again, since it's close to Halloween, I'll say that the Mayans would sometimes cut themselves with knives and let some of their own blood drip out as an offering. Or they would sometimes ritually pierce their noses and run a small rope through the hole and move it back and forth to encourage bleeding. A little gross, perhaps. But relatively peaceful.

The early Mayans offered blood sacrifice. But it was technically auto-sacrifice, self-sacrifice. They were sacrificing a part of their own blood.

But a time came when the Mayans gave up that kind of worship. The time came when they adopted their neighbors' practices, when they began sacrificing other people. They would kill their neighbors, placing parts of them in the dish of a Chacmool.

Instead of offering their own blood, they would go out and find victims and bring them back and cut out their beating hearts in sacrifice.

Late Mayan religion looked very different from early Mayan religion. The Mayans did not stick with what they believed. And the religiously peaceful Mayans who used to offer a part of themselves in worship became the vicious Mayans who ripped other people's beating hearts out of their bodies.

That's why I keep Chacmool around, as a warning. The same warning Paul gives Timothy. Stick with what you've learned and believed. For the time is coming when people will turn away from the truth and wander away. It happened to the Mayans. It's happened to Christians in the past. It can happen to us today.

There was a time in my life when, in my pride and arrogance, I sat in judgment over scripture. I was a cafeteria or buffet style Christian. I accepted the parts of scripture I liked and rejected the parts I didn't like. I listened to the voices who told my itching ears exactly what they wanted to hear, and ignored the rest. It took a change for me to give up sitting in judgment over scripture, and for me to begin, to begin to allow scripture to sit in judgment over me.

And now I'm going to go from preaching to meddling. One place we need to let scripture sit in judgment over us is in our politics.

And I see it happening on both sides of the aisle. I have experienced this dynamic with both liberal and moderate and conservative Christians.

I will state categorically, that as Christians, our faith should ALWAYS inform our politics. The way we vote should be according to our consciences and according to our understandings of who God is and what God asks of us.

But the reverse is NEVER true. Our political leanings and human philosophies should NEVER determine what we believe religiously. We shouldn't first make up our minds politically, and then try to find some way to justify it religiously. No. God comes first. Scripture comes first.

As Paul said, 2 Timothy 3:16:

"All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness."

And those words apply to our politics. Teaching. Reproof. Correction. Training.

Our faith should teach our politics. Our faith should offer reproof politically. Our faith should correct us in our personal political decision-making. Our faith should train us in the way we vote that we may do so righteously.

We need to listen to God first. Only God can come first for a Christian. And any human politicians or pundits or protesters or philosophers, or yes, even preachers, have to come in second or third or fifth or tenth or twentieth. And this applies whether you're liberal, moderate, or conservative.

I don't want any of us to fall prey to the way of a Chacmool. I don't want to fall into the trap of forsaking the truth in order to follow whatever path seems politically expedient to me. I don't want my politics to dictate my faith.

Instead, I want God to come first. I want to hear God's voice. I want to follow the path of Jesus Christ. I want scripture to train me to live God's way.

Stick to what you have learned.

Hold fast to what you have believed.

Trust in the living God, who has given us his living Word.