

Views from the Pews: The faith of a hermit crab

Isaiah continues his imagery taken from the natural world in ever-more delightful and thought-provoking ways. Today he describes the relief and joy of the redeemed as they journey across the desert to Zion. Imagine, for a moment, this very familiar passage translated into completely unfamiliar terms, continuing the image developed last week of the church as a crab.

One group of crabs, the hermit crabs, has found an extra form of protection: they back themselves into a discarded snail shell. They each have a long soft tail ending in a special pair of claws, which they extend up around the inside spiral and take a firm grip on it. Thereafter, protected by an empty snail shell of the right size, they can move about, carrying the shell around like a snail with legs.

The snag about crab life in general is that, as the crab grows, its exoskeleton gets too tight, so it has to moult and grow a bigger one. The double snag for a growing hermit crab is that it also then has to find a new and bigger shell, which might be quite a different shape. The period between abandoning the old shell and finding a new one that fits is very dangerous, because that is when the hermit crab's vulnerable tail is exposed.

Christianity also has an exoskeleton, a set of religious institutions in which its faith is temporarily organised in various forms. But the Church also has a soft tail, where it is vulnerable to attack by the outside world. To protect its tail, Christianity has developed over the years many traditions and doctrines designed to defend its members from damage and to answer the critics. Doctrines, like snail shells, that are effective for the moment will not remain so indefinitely; live churches, like live crabs, cannot help growing out of them.

Just as a hermit crab has to move out of a shell that becomes too tight, faith tends to be driven out of a doctrine that the current generation no longer finds helpful. That applies especially to many doctrines and revered traditions surrounding the Advent season and Christmas. As we journey to find a new shell, we can take heart from Isaiah: we will be protected from jackals and lions, and the weak among us will be strengthened by the hope of glory, because 'no traveller, not even fools, shall go astray' (v. 8).

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