HOMILIES

March 15, 2020 – May 21, 2021

Francis X. Clooney, S.J.

Writing the Word in a Time of Pandemic

March 15, 2020 – May 21, 2021

The 62 Homilies:

LENT

Keeping in Touch during the Pandemic: a Lenten Homily / March 15, 2020

Sight and Blindness during a Pandemic / March 20, 2020

"Jesus Wept" God with Us during the Pandemic / March 28, 2020

When Jesus Entered the City: Facing Down Fear, Eyes Open / April 4, 2020 / EASTER

EASTER

Terrified at the Resurrection: Easter during a Pandemic / April 11, 2020

Easter in the Cruelest Month / April 18, 2020

On the Road of Lost Hopes / April 24, 2020

Good Shepherds, Bandits, and the Pandemic / May 2, 2020

Knowing Christ in the Love We Do / May 9, 2020

In the Springtime of the Spirit (in lieu of a homily) / May 16, 2020

Waiting for the Spirit, Learning to Breathe / May 23, 2020

"I can't breathe:" Needing Spirit at Pentecost / May 29, 2020

The Trinity: God-with-Us in a World of Woe / June 6, 2020

Corpus Christi: Food for the Journey / June 13, 2020

ORDINARY TIME

Juneteenth and the Sacred Heart, in Ordinary Time / June 20, 2020

Welcoming Those God Sends to Us / June 27, 2020 / Take Refuge with the Lord / July 4, 2020

When Nature Shows Us God / July 10, 2020

Praying, Breathing / July 17, 2020

Finding Wisdom in Everyday Life / July 24, 2020

Compassion Is Possible – If We Too Have Grieved / July 31, 2020

When God Suddenly Appears / August 7, 2020

Crumbs for a Canaanite Woman / August 14, 2020

Keeping in Touch during the Pandemic: a Lenten Homily

March 15, 2020

Jesus came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there. Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon. A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." (John 4:5-10)

Thus begins an ultimately comforting chapter of John; but when Jesus travels to Samaria in John 4, he is on uncomfortable terrain. After all, the Samaritans and Jews, though intimately and from ancient times related, were long at odds with one another. It would have not been unusual for a Jew to avoid Samaritan territory, and Samaritans to keep their distance from Jewish towns. They are unwelcome, impure to one another.

But he is there, and irresistibly he gets involved. He is thirsty, for a time alone; he has no bucket, and so he asks a stranger for a drink of water: a Samaritan, a woman, a woman who was married and divorced many times over. She is the one who feels instinctively that this contact is socially unapproved; she is inclined to keep her distance. But by the very fact of the conversation, by his invitation to her – come, drink the water of everlasting life – and by his intuition about her life, Jesus becomes deeply a part of her life, the person who tells her everything about herself, yet in a life-giving way.

The result, of course, is equally remarkable, as she, like Andrew and Philip in John 1, becomes one of the first to spread the news of Jesus to her people. Her word is strikingly effective:

> Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I have ever done." So when the

> Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. (39-40)

Not only does he pass through impure territory, not only does he talk to this unnamed woman; he even enters the village, he eats and drinks there, and he stays there for several days - longer than almost anywhere else in the Gospels. These Samaritans recognize him in the way most of us do not:

> And many more believed because of his word.They said to the woman, “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world.” (41-42)

Now all of this is wonderful, and draws our Lenten observance to a new level. We, after all, are the woman; we are the villagers with whom Jesus dwells for a time; and we are the clueless disciples. We live in a world where divisions are rife, and where we, like the kindred Jews and Samaritans, find reasons to stand divided even from other Catholics. Not even religious differences, even true and important ones, should any longer made into automatic excuses for division:

> Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” (21-24)

Lent is the time when this Jesus walks into our lives, and takes us seriously, and ends up telling us who we are. Barriers fall, walls are broken through, and we begin to live, in Spirit, in Truth.

But there is a little more to say. Ours is a time of the great pandemic. Jesus is the one who asks us, right now, not to live in isolation, seeking to be immune to one another. (Immune: "protected or exempt, especially from an obligation or the effects of something.") To be sure, the example of Jesus ought not encourage us to be casual during our medical pandemic, risking ourselves and others. But there is also the spiritual pandemic of suspicion, fear, isolation, exclusion, which began before and will last after the coronavirus is behind us. Jesus is reminding us of the need to *stay in touch*,

sharing what we need to eat and drink, dwelling together. We too need to refuse to let temporary physical barriers and fears make us cold strangers to one another.

Right now, this March of 2020, our Lenten season, is the time when he shows up in our lives and shows to us the very depths of God:

> The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming” (who is called Christ). “When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.” Jesus said to her, “**I am** — the one who is speaking to you.” (25-26)

Precisely because we are in a time of medical and spiritual pandemic we — like the woman, like the villagers, like Jesus — need to move freely, freed in the Spirit, recognizing the truth that wherever we are, whatever our situation, God is right there, touching us.

(Based on a Sunday homily planned but never given, due to the suspension of Masses in the Archdiocese of Boston; March 15, 2020)

Sight and Blindness during a Pandemic

March 20, 2020

Last week, in the first of my sermon/blog posts on the Sunday Gospels (written in lieu of homilies at Mass during pandemic in Lent), it was consoling to reflect on the interchange of Jesus and the woman at the well in the Gospel of John 4; we could see how Jesus broke boundaries, and we could appreciate the good that came of it, and the Samaritans persuaded him to stay with them for several days. John 9 is this week's Gospel (March 22). It is the story of the man born blind who is cured, but it offers no ready consolation. I have always found it to be one of the darkest chapters of the New Testament. (It is even disturbing on an elemental level, given John's extremely negative portrayal of "the Jews." See my comment at the end of this piece.)

A certain darkness – even blindness – pervades the chapter, from start to finish. First, there is a man born blind, and we learn only rather mysteriously what his blindness means or rather does:

> As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. (1-3)

But what are God's works? There is a healing early in the chapter, involving both physical detail and the demands of faith:

> When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. (6-7)

But that is over and done with by verse 7, yet the chapter is 41 verses long. There is no celebration mentioned, no marveling at this miracle, no rejoicing, no thanking God. The neighbors seem slightly put off, that the "man born blind" is now something else – a case of mistaken identity? does he even have a name? what to do with him now that he is no longer "the beggar"?

> The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, “Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?” Some were saying, “It is he.” Others were saying, “No, but it is someone like him.” He kept saying, “I am the man.” But they kept asking him, “Then how were your eyes opened?” He answered, “The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, ‘Go to Siloam and wash.’ Then I went and washed and received my sight.” (8-11)

Like them, the Pharisees who pursue the interrogation do not believe that such a cure is possible, certainly not here and now, by Jesus:

> They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, “He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see.” Some of the Pharisees said, “This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath.” But others said, “How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?” (13-16)

The chapter therefore has meanings - and its real meaning - beyond eyesight for a blind man. That is, the stark, abrupt intervention of Christ in the sad condition of the man born blind spirals downward into stark judgments on everyone else: the clueless disciples who just want to know who to blame for his blindness; the neighbors who are unsettled by the sudden change; his own parents, fearful for themselves, who pull back and leave it to their son to speak for himself; and, again, the Pharisees, who seem to take treat this as a crime scene: who is to blame for this cure? Even at the chapter’s end, the darkness is unalleviated:

> Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, “Surely we are not blind, are we?” Jesus said to them, “If you were blind, you would have no sin. But now that you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains. (40-41)

None of this is very comforting. Jesus does cure, but only by removing blindness in a dark, cold, unthankful, unseeing space. What is there worth seeing? Perhaps we are being shown – if we ourselves will see it – that our world was in pandemic state even before the coronavirus first caught our attention. Too often we take for granted the suffering of others. We may be curious but do not *really* care about the (to us) unimaginable suffering of other people in other places: the poor, the refugees, the oppressed and excluded, the homeless, the imprisoned, those born with ailments we wish we could assign blame for, the unborn. We are oddly inconvenienced if it turns out that if “the poor and the disadvantaged” have real voices and can really speak, see us, talk to us as our equals: “I am the man.”
The pandemic is opening our eyes to uncomfortable truths, as even the comfortable are discomforted. I know that I have had a long and thus far privileged life. It is only in rare moments, such as right now, that I begin to realize that I am

not really immune to the troubles I read about in the newspaper every day. I could be the next victim! We see a blind man's eyes opened, expect it to be an item of good news to cheer our day: but ~~a~~the whole thing forces us to decide whether we really want to see what our world is really like:

> Jesus said, "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind." (39)

So there we are: a cure, amid still greater blindness.

Except of course, I have skipped the one sign of hope: the man himself. He is no defective lesser being, a victim to be helped and then sent off. Through the whole story, he is the one who knows what has happened, what is true, and even what is still beyond him:

> They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, *"I do not know."*
>
> So they said again to the blind man, "What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened." He said, *"He is a prophet."*
>
> He answered, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. *One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see."*
>
> They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" He answered them, "I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? *Do you also want to become his disciples?*" (12, 17, 25, 26-27)

But most beautifully of all,

> Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" He answered, "And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him." Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he." He said, *"Lord, I believe."* And he worshiped him. (35-38)

Like the woman at the well and her neighbors who welcomed Jesus and recognized his lordship, like the woman caught in adultery (John 7-8), this man no longer blind has learned from his marginality, outsider status, disadvantage. In all that time that he sat there as a beggar, he was always paying attention, listening, noticing how people were acting toward him and one another. Blindness made his every other sense all the more acute.

Perhaps then another message for us in our time of crisis is this: however we may have imagined this year to proceed, and however upset we are – even if we are not (yet) actually sick - the crisis puts life right before in front of us: our whole lives pass before our eyes, as they say. However bad it is, the pandemic – to be blamed on no one – serves a purpose, *that God's works might be revealed in it.* The pandemic will become a matter of history, but the starker choice before us won't go away: shall we be blind to our neighbors in need, bothered when their humanity and rich complexity become too evident, wed more to our ordinary ways of doing things than to God's glory at work in the world? Or can we come to say, "Lord, I too believe"?

Afterword: The chapter is marred by John's unrelievedly negative view of the Pharisees, alternatively called merely "the Jews." This Gospel does this a lot, and as read, has done a lot of damage over the centuries. We are well beyond the time when we can simply overlook the problem, giving the Gospels a free pass. We should not stop learning from John, but we must remember always that whatever the experience of the tiny Johannine community, the Gospel has a few poisonous elements that enabled it to be used in harmful ways over the generations. But perhaps our eyes are now painfully opened to this too: even on the best of days, when the light shines in a miraculous way, the darkness remains very nearby, inside, not merely outside.

"Jesus Wept": God with Us during the Pandemic

March 28, 2020

On the Sunday at the heart of this Lenten season, we hear again one of the great stories from the Gospel according to John~~ and if we~~ listen, they impact us as individuals, as communities, and as simply human in a pandemic world. The story of the woman at the well (John 4) was fundamentally consoling; the cure of the man born blind and the exposure of the blindness of so many others (John 9) was challenging, stark, dark. In the Gospel for this 5th Sunday in Lent, Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead (John 11). In John's typical and unnerving style, this is both surreal – who can raise the dead, who seriously believes in such things? – and confusingly human, as the late-arriving Jesus finds when he comes finally to Bethany.

Jesus restores his deceased friend to life, and seems to promise the same for every listener. John 11 is often used at funerals, as both preachers and hymn-writers pick up on the consoling words,

> 25 "I am the resurrection and the life.Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, 26 and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die."

But the whole story is puzzling too. When Jesus hears of Lazarus' severe illness, he does not go racing to the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus, to save him from death; nor does he cure him from a distance, as earlier (John 4) he cured the official's son without going to his home. He delays and does nothing, until it is too late:

> 4 But when Jesus heard it, he said, "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." 5 Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, 6 after having heard that Lazaruswas ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

So Lazarus dies. This specific delay and specific death are for God's glory: this is the same reason given in John 9.3 for the blindness of the man born blind: "He was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him."

Even when Jesus arrives too late, the proper words are ready to go. Martha believes in Jesus and aptly professes her faith:

> 23 Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." 24 Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." 25 Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, 26 and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" 27 She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

But not now. Resurrection yes, but only later. Only a bit later, she is pointing out that Lazarus has been in the grave for a few days, and it is too late to bring out the body:

> 39 Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days."

"Resurrection and life" do not cover the smell of death.

In the end, of course, Jesus restores Lazarus to life. As in Chapter 9, here too is no joyful reunion, no celebration, no hallelujahs. Some believe, but other run to the leaders, to denounce Jesus and set in motion the coming arrest and murder of Jesus:

> 45 Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him. 46 But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what he had done.

And the sequel is at first sight not a happy one. Caiphas involuntarily offers a prophecy he himself does not understand:

> 50 "You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed." 51 He did not say this on his own, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus was about to die for the nation, 52 and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God. 53 So from that day on they planned to put him to death.

We learn too in Chapter 12 that they want to kill Lazarus too, since he is an uncomfortable reminder of what Jesus scandalously has done.

So what's the point? A cycle of life-death-rising-life-death-rising, over and over? Perhaps. But John is also highlighting the cost of believing any of this, the way through death to life. For it is in this chapter that Jesus grieves more than anywhere else in the Gospels.

The heart of the story lies right in the middle. Mary, closer to the heart of Jesus, has faith, but she also weeps, since she knows that it is too late. She draws Jesus into her deep sadness:

> 32 When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and
> said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have
> died." 33 When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also
> weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. 34 He said,
> "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see."

Come and see: in John 1, Jesus had invited the first disciples to his house: *come and see*. Come and visit the Word-made-flesh. Here, the invitation reverses the dynamic: Come, God, and see how we suffer, die, and grieve. In John's typical way – the passion comes before the Passion – and Jesus now reaches the depths of his becoming-flesh, at this tomb with a stone rolled in front of it. (In Philippians 2, St. Paul sees the death of Jesus on the cross as the utmost depth of his humility. Perhaps, but John sees that the death of a loved one can be harder than one's

own death.) Jesus is deeply moved, not merely the master who already knows the happy ending. He comes, sees — and weeps:

> 35 **Jesus wept**. 36 So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” 37 But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying? 38 Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb.

It is here that the promise of John 1 is finally, really fulfilled:

> 14 The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us.

The glory of God is now revealed — in the worst of situations, when ordinary consolations and ordinary words of comfort have run out, when all the right words are still right, but no longer work. In the face of a death too late to reverse, in tears with tears, God is present, caught up in our human plight. Here is the portal, the way to life through death.

During our pandemic: quite often, too often, I delay in the face of death, detaching myself from other people’s deaths, especially when they happen far away, or simply not on the street where I live. We postpone coming down to dwell among those who suffer. In our scriptures we have all the right words, but such words work only to some extent — nice words, too verbal, not fleshly enough — and gain force only when we are finally there, in the middle, among those who are lost.

We are not characters in John 11. Resurrection is not happening right away. Those dying each day in such terrifying numbers are not coming back. Those who are helping the sick and dying risk dying themselves. The words of holy books do not insulate us. Rather they push us to be with those in dire need, standing together near the many graves, tears mingled. The least we do is show up, mourn with those who mourn, weep with those who weep. Then the words of Jesus may break through with some other power:

> 43 Lazarus, come forth!

In the days of the pandemic, even if we remain very careful about distancing ourselves, let us at least in our hearts show up, cease to be distant, dwell among those who suffer, our tears mingling with theirs, at every tomb. That is a start, at least; that is what Jesus did, will do - in what we do - in our time of loss.

When Jesus Entered the City: Facing Down Fear, Eyes Open

April 4, 2020

April 5: Jerome Adams, Surgeon General, issued a warning, that we will face a "Pearl Harbor moment" in the next week, with "an unprecedented numbers of coronavirus deaths expected coast to coast."

On the same day, President Trump warned, "This will be probably the toughest week, between this week and next week," he said, "And there will be a lot of death unfortunately."

April 5 is also Palm Sunday, when Christians enter the holiest week of the Christian year, even as we remember our Jewish sisters and brothers who begin Passover on April 8. Even in the best of times, Palm Sunday is an odd moment of seeming triumph, as Jesus enters his city, just a few days before he is condemned and dies horribly on the cross. Some of the people who cheer him on Sunday cry out for his blood on Friday; if we have any sense, we realize that it is not just *those people then*, but *us people now* who are the fickle friends of Jesus who forget him, exclude him from our lives, in small ways betray all we have learned from him — and perhaps, like Peter, deny even knowing him when it is convenient to cover over our discipleship.

A lot of death is to come, but on this Sunday the scene is grand:

> When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, ‘The Lord needs them.’ And he will send them immediately.” This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, “Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”
>
> The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowdspread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!”
>
> When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, “Who is this?” The crowds were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.” (c. 21)

But what strikes me most this year is how Jesus knowingly entered the city, very aware of his own peril. He knew that he was walking right into his own death, as Matthew has reminded us three time already:

> From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. (c. 16)
>
> As they were gatheringin Galilee, Jesus said to them, “The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and on the third day he will be raised.” And they were greatly distressed. (c. 17)
>
> While Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside by themselves, and said to them on the way, “See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death. (c. 20)

Even after entering the city, he is quite clear on his own doom and that of the holy city:

> “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you, desolate.For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, ‘Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.’” (c. 23)

But he does not run away. He stays and stares into the face of death. How easy it would have been to head in the other direction, to some remote area for ministry at a distance, avoiding the holy city at all costs! But Jesus entered directly into the very heart of his coming darkness. He is neither fooled by the adulation nor chased off by the impending doom he already senses.

Most of us are rightly sheltering at home during this emergency. But we witness the brave women and men who day after day face death as they head into hospitals and clinics that are the most dangerous sites of all in order to aid and comfort the sick and dying; and we see the endless small braveries of women and men who show up for work in grocery stores and pharmacies, at transit systems, and a host of other duties that cannot be abandoned: from a Christian perspective, we would say they are sharing in the mission of Jesus, who knowingly ascended to the city where he would die.

It is notable too that Matthew's Jesus does not enter the city for just a dramatic few hours, as if immediately to share the Last Supper, and then die and then rise. Matthew devotes four full chapters to what happens between Palm Sunday and the Last Supper, that “Monday to Wednesday” period we hardly think about: Jesus argues with the leaders and learned scholars; he curses the fig tree and cleanses the temple; he weeps over Jerusalem; he foretells the cataclysmic end of the world; he tells parables of banquets and weddings, insiders and outsider; he urges us to be vigilant and watch, since he will return soon, in fear and trembling, but comfort for those who are awake. Perhaps most poignantly, he tells the great parable of the last judgment, which speaks of the end of all things, but more immediately tells us how Jesus is with us in every trouble, in the suffering of the most vulnerable:

> ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family,[f] you did it to me.’ (c. 25)

We Jesuits are used to saying that we are called to find God is in all things. So true,

and the point now is to remember Jesus has come to Jerusalem, knowing he will die there; he continues his honest and true, stark and comforting ministry; and he reminds us that his compassion — his presence-in suffering — was not just for then, that holy week, but for now too, in every positive Covid-19 test, in every premature death, in every moment of isolation and fear, and especially in the poorest and imprisoned and homeless on every continent who have nowhere to hide during our pandemic.

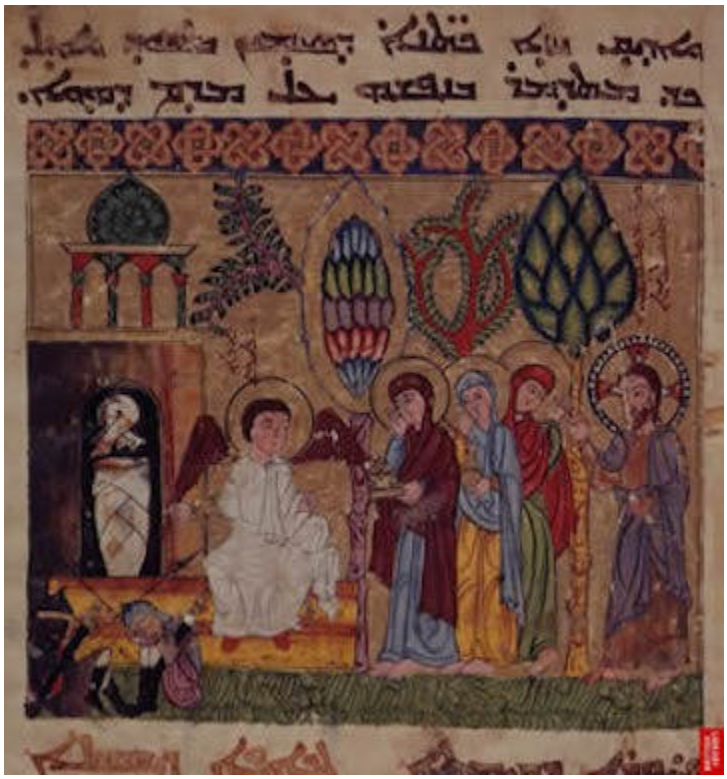
And so Holy Week opens up and is all around us. Many of us regret that churches are closed this week, services canceled or only online. But Holy Week is happening. It is not as if the last days of Jesus, and the last supper, the washing of the feet, the agony in the garden, the dying on Friday and burial in a hastily prepared tomb do not happen: they do, but not in church — these holy events happen everywhere else this week, because Jesus did not turn away, but entered among his people, entering into the holiness of our world in its suffering, making it his own. This week he is everywhere among us, by the bed of every dying person and in the last breaths of that person; he is present in every news report, in every photo and video, on every chart and in every prediction of things getting worse before they get better; he acts in every brave act of facing up to things and loving our neighbor in thought, word, and deed. Let us make our week holy, walking with him as he has walked with us.

There is more, of course: at Mass on Palm Sunday, we hear also Matthew's great and solemn account of the passion and death of Jesus (cc. 26-27). I cannot go into that great account now – and what could I add? - but we do well to return to it this week, reading it as if for the first time, finding ourselves in the account, letting it shed true light on our current moment of darkness. Or let Johann Sebastian Bach teach you, listen to his great St. Matthew Passion. You can find many performances on Youtube, even with subtitles.

(The first three homilies in this series - written instead of preached in simpler form at Our Lady of Sorrows, Sharon MA — can be found at this same website.)

Terrified at the Resurrection: Easter during a Pandemic

April 11, 2020



During this time of pandemic, many of us had hoped fondly that the shutdown, distancing, and sudden rupture of ordinary life all would be over by Easter. Lent has seemed an appropriate for withdrawal, solitude, suffering, and for compassion for those who suffer more than we do. Even Holy Saturday (when I write this written-only homily) is appropriately a day of emptiness, silence, a cold and dark tomb blocked with a massive stone. A waiting game, in the face of death. But in the same vein, Easter should so aptly be a day of abrupt change for the better: bright, sunny, warm, flowers more confidently blossoming —ideally celebrating a clear (beginning of the) end of the pandemic. But while there are signs that the worst may be over is some countries (such as Italy and Spain) and some cities (such as New York and Boston), there is no neat division, suffering in Lent, healing at Easter. The resurrection of Christ does not end all suffering in so simple a manner.

The preceding paragraph is a lead-up to reflection on what is probably the first of all the Resurrection accounts in the Gospels (Paul had much to say, in a different genre, in I Corinthians 15). This is the way Mark, first of all the evangelists, puts it in his sixteenth chapter:

> When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were *alarmed*. But he said to them, “*Do*

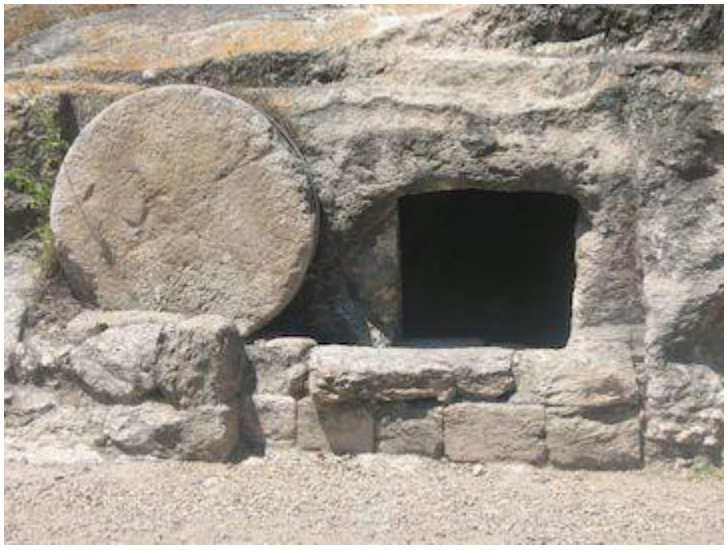
> *not be alarmed*; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. (1-6)

We find variants on this same account in all four Gospels. The empty tomb alarms the women, since something unexpected, eerie, has happened: *he is not here*. They knew what death is, and how to anoint the deceased; but they did not know how to make sense of a tomb that is suddenly empty; after all, neither the women nor the readers are allowed to see Jesus rising.

When this passage makes its one appearance in the lectionary, at the Easter Vigil in Year B, one more verse is added, an instruction:

> But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you." (7)

The empty tomb is not simply an unsettling mystery; it is immediately the occasion for the beginning of the mission, to preach the good news of the Resurrection of Christ, first to the disciples, and then to all those in Jerusalem and then, to the whole world. We too may feel obliged, and empowered, at Easter, to share the hope of the risen Christ. We want to be consoled by good news on this Easter in particular – and we want to have a good word of hope, beyond the dying and death around us, on Easter and in the days to come. Yet it is not easy, since words of hope, amid continuing death, can come across as merely optimistic, clueless to the reality. When the news is still largely bad news, how can we offer hope to fellow believers, and then to a wider, more complicated interreligious population, and even to those who have no bond to the story of Christ's dying and rising? So what to say?



Mark is wisely hesitant about quickly turning the Resurrection into ready good news. This is why he has one more thing to say in this earliest account of the Resurrection. There is verse 8, a verse that notably is never read at any Mass in the Catholic liturgical year:

> So they went out and *fled* from the tomb, for *terror* and *amazement* had *seized* them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were *afraid*. (8)

Such a gloomy ending! There are several added endings to Mark, beginning with a happier turn, inserted very early on: “And all that had been commanded them they told briefly to those around Peter. And afterward Jesus himself sent out through them, from east to west, the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation.” But scholars say that verse 8 may be where Mark ended his short, difficult, rough-edged telling of the Resurrection: no appearing of Jesus, no Peter and John running out to the tomb, no disciples on the road to Emmaus — only these unsettling, inconclusive words, worth hearing again:

> So they went out and *fled* from the tomb, for *terror* and *amazement* had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were *afraid*. (8)

These women, the ones who loved Jesus most of all, who alone and first came to the tomb, left the tomb; they fled; they were terrified; amazed; afraid – and so they had no words, *they said nothing to anyone*.

What does Mark mean by this? My guess is that he wanted to avoid domesticating or packaging the Resurrection, as if to make it simply a happy ending to the life and times of his hero, Jesus. He probably wanted us to stop and wait by the empty tomb, sharing in the women’s alarm and fear and terror, and spend some time in that uncertain, unprecedented space. This uncomfortable waiting would mean then to speak of the risen Christ, not simply in familiar terms — he died, but now he’s back! — but only after a certain emptiness, with new words arising out of the unknown, in what we do not have words for: witness not only to the defeat of death, but the beginning of a Life unlike any we have known thus far. The women were the first witnesses, but they simply were not ready to speak. Mark was confident that they would find their voice; otherwise even his Gospel would have been for naught.

Resurrected life is not a restoration — a return to the time before violence, before pandemic — but a new, post-life & death reality. Even earlier than Mark, Paul had grasped something of the new life that of the Resurrection, such as we hardly understand:

> Someone may ask, “How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?” Fool! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And as for what you sow, you do not sow the body that is to be, but a bare seed, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain…What I am saying, brothers and sisters, is this: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed… (*I Corinthians* 35-37, 50-52)

Something new comes about in the Resurrection of Jesus; something unheard of, unanticipated, a greater rupture than death itself: not life as we know it, nor death as we face it, but a Life beyond life-and-death, all at once, imperishable, suddenly upon us in the twinkling of an eye.

If so, then we need, once again in 2020, amid pandemic and all else that ails us, to learn how to speak resurrection-words that stop the ordinary way of things and draw people into the mystery of Life writ large and whole. But the cost of such learning may belong to those who imitate Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome, who loved Jesus enough to visit the tomb where he was laid, there to suffer alarm, terror, fear, amazement, silencing – all as prelude to what can be said later, in effective words, once death, empty tomb, and resurrection have truly sunk in. So if we want to be hopeful on this Easter, but find ourselves for now still at a loss for words, not to worry: the first witnesses to the Resurrection had the same experience.

But find your own way into the mystery of Easter. I found Mark 16 best for this year, in its stark honesty, loss of words, sheer encounter with the emptiness of God — but you can explore any of the Gospels in their last chapters, and Paul too. Or, as in Lent, once more let Johann Sebastian Bach teach you, this time with his Easter Oratorio, in many places on the web, but here with subtitles. Or more simply, try George Frederick Handel: I know that my redeemer liveth , and Death, where is thy sting?

Easter in the Cruelest Month

April 18, 2020

As I began writing this homily today (April 18) for the Second Sunday of Easter, it was snowing out, at least here in Cambridge MA. (Now, midday, it is only dreary.) It should be spring, warm, sunny, and given all that is going on, we could hope that at least nature would be consoling us with warm and beautiful weather. But here in New England, the season is always unpredictable, spring hinting its arrival in a brighter sun and delicate blossoms one day, but then sending us more snow on the next day and the text. To only slightly misread TS Eliot's *Wasteland*, "April is the cruelest month." Indeed.

A season that tricks us, disappoints or surprises us, sliding backward into winter, disappointing when it should be comforting, timing passing with a certain sharp edge: I mention this because we are now a week into Eastertide, the weeks when we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus, his conquest of death; a time this year when for ourselves, the Church, and all our sisters and brothers of many faiths (and none), we seek hope and new life in the face of so much sickness and death around us. And so it should be. But alas, this Easter season is no simpler than the New England spring. It is not a simple, sure, straightforward coming back to life of nature, the dead of winter and sin giving way to a sure bright (pandemic-free) springtime of new life. If only.

John 20, including today's Gospel (20.19-28), reminds us in vivid stories how the coming-to-life that is Easter is not a matter of simple progress:

> 1 Mary goes to the tomb, and finds it empty;
>
> 2-10 Mary summons Peter and the beloved apostle to the tomb, and they ascertain that it is indeed empty, and return home;

11-18 Mary, who loved Jesus most, stays weeping at the tomb. Jesus comes to her, calls her by name, so she knows him; and then he sends her to tell the apostles that he is ascending to his place with God;

19-23 Jesus appears to the apostles in the closed upper room, where they are hiding in fear. He comforts them, and breathes his spirit (Spirit) upon them;

24-28 But Thomas was not there, and upon his return he does not find the apostles' testimony convincing. A week later, Jesus comes again; Thomas sees him and falls to his knees, and makes the great – greatest? – profession of faith: "My Lord and my God."

But this is not merely entertainment or edification from a distance. Suddenly, at chapter's end, the evangelist speaks directly to us, to remind us that we are part of John 20's narrative, along with those we have been observing:

Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? *Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe*."

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name. (20.29-31)

Put yourself into the story, be there amid the uncertainties, emptinesses, mis-recognitions, tears, and overwhelming gifts of new life: all of this is for you, that you may be fully alive. You are Mary, John, Peter, Thomas...

With a certain irony, the evangelist (or another, likeminded author) adds the 21st chapter. Once more, uncertainly creeps into the season of resurrection. Despite everything, the apostles have gone back to work, to their fishing. After a fruitless night on the lake, once again they fail to recognize Jesus, who is right there on the shore. When they finally see who it is, Jesus surprises them again. He cooks them breakfast:

When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net

> was not torn. Jesus said to them, “Come and have breakfast.” Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, “Who are you?” because they knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. (21.9-13)

The Lord who washed their feet now serves them breakfast. The risen Christ will find us not only in an offical Upper Room, but just there, where we live and work. This is the last of the great “signs” in the Gospel according to John.

By the two chapters taken together, John is telling us, I think, that this season of resurrection is as unpredictable as any springtime in which the world comes back to life. Dying does not suddenly stop, life does not take over all at once and proceed by a smooth path to ever greater fullness of life. There are stops and starts, missed opportunities, mistaken identities, failures to listen to one another, failures to speak convincingly of Christ. Christ appears in expected and unexpected places; he comes and goes, he ascends, he cooks us breakfast. And then he goes missing again.

All this is a manner of consolation in this Easter-during-Pandemic, when emptiness – of the tomb, of our lives perhaps – may dominate, when cold snow falls and tries to smother even late-April flowers, when words of resurrection and as many Alleluias as you wish offer only cool if not cold comfort. Christ rises in our midst by stops and starts, that we may come to believe as best we can, that “through believing we may have life in his name.” Imperfection is the best starting point; indeed, imperfectly recognizing the risen Christ is the only starting point. Let us be Thomas, impetuous in his love, good-hearted in his doubts, eloquent in his faith:

> Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.” (11.16)

> Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.” Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God! (20.27)

In the end, of course, spring does eventually come.

Easter on the Road of Lost Hopes

April 24, 2020

The key insight we might take away from today's Gospel — the Third Sunday of Easter (April 26) — from Luke 24, is that the story of the two disciples on the way to Emmaus may be one of the most eloquent and beloved stories in the Gospels, but it is actually unnecessary.

After all, Luke 24 flows quite nicely if we have this sequence:

> 1-12 the women come to the tomb and find it empty; they tell Peter, and he comes, and finds the tomb empty;
>
> 36-49 Jesus appears to the apostles in the upper room, eats with them, and gives them their mission, to be witnesses to his death and resurrection;
>
> 50-52 Jesus ascends to the Father.

All of this is quite clear and familiar, albeit extraordinary, and we might be quite content with it. So what is the need for the inserted verses 13-35, more than half the chapter, that serve as the Gospel for the Third Sunday of Easter?

After all, we do not have any clue who these people are — a Cleopas and someone else, presumably his wife — or why they should matter. As they explain to the stranger on the road, they are just people who used to have hope:

> But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. (21)

Had hoped: though they heard the stories of the empty tomb, the reports of some extraordinary reversal of death into life, nevertheless they've given up, and are merely going home; they are no longer believing in Jesus or their dreams connected to him. All this is a major interruption that is not necessary, and hardly edifying. It is merely about two people, this man and this woman, who are not apostles, not leaders, not chosen, not even the women at the tomb. They are

everybody else — they are us, people at a remove or two who learn the hard way that dreams die and that when hope is gone, it is time to go home.
But too: their time on the road, their giving up and going home, their abandonment of discipleship — is just the right setting for the risen Christ to appear unexpectedly, anonymously, in the wrong place, with the wrong people, in the wrong direction:

> Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. (12-16)

They do not know who he is. They are just honest about the fact that they no longer believe. But a stranger on the road, the no-man, talks to them about the tradition they have known from childhood, their own Jewish tradition, all that is theirs but which they still do not understand:

> Then he said to them, “Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiahshould suffer these things and then enter into his glory?” Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures. (25-27)

There is no new revelation, no sudden recognition or act of worship: he simply tells them what they already know. They simply keep walking with the stranger, not realizing that their journey to Emmaus — a nothing-place, of no importance — is the journey they had always hoped for, as the Jesus they thought they had lost walks home with them. As they admit later,

> Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us? (32)

But they would never have understood even this much, except that when they reach Emmaus, they make a decent gesture toward the stranger:

> As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, “Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.” (28-29)

This is not a Jesus of grand gestures or visions on Jerusalem or encounters with Peter or other apostles: it is simply the Jesus of the open road, the stranger who would without hesitation have simply gone away, if that couple had not the kindness to invite him in. But they do, and he shares their meal, and then everything changes:

> When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. (30-31)

There are two things to notice here. First, it is with these marginal people, and not with the apostles in the upper room, that the risen Christ first breaks bread. Before he gets to that upper room, he shows himself, to ordinary people who have lost hope, that they might rediscover hope in a meal they share with a stranger. Second, he disappears: it is now up to them to tell the story and make other hearts burn with love.

For it is only when this couple turns around and rushes back to Jerusalem, to tell everyone what happened in Emmaus that Jesus shows up there too:

> That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, “The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!” But then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread. While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." (33-36)

In other words, it is Jesus’ accidental/providential encounter with anonymous disciples heading in the wrong direction that is the prompt for his more famous appearance to the apostles, to eat in their presence and send them on mission. The faith of an unknown couple makes the earliest Church happen. Or of many such couples: for who is to say that Jesus did not that very same day meet many other ordinary, disappointed followers on other roads too?

In the typically odd way that is the way of the Gospels, this is a Word for us during the great pandemic of 2020, as it inconveniently intrudes on the Easter season. We are not gathered in a customary fashion in church. We are not following through on the Easter season in the right way. We are at home, distanced, scattered. Perhaps, when we read the papers or scan the web, we are people who

“had hoped” but “no longer hope.” The point of this Gospel is that Jesus does not give up on us, and he does not merely wait in the right place at the right time for us to show up. He sets out to find us and walks with us where we are. No big show; perhaps we don't even notice that he is there. If we are scattered, he scatters too; if we are not in the holy city, but on the mundane roads of ordinary life, that is where he chooses to be; if we are marooned at home, distanced and masked, then that is exactly where he shows up next.

So the next time you share a meal in your home, the next time you break the bread with the hungry and homeless as best you can, keep your eyes open: he is *right here*. May our hearts burn within us!

And as a bonus, here is a lovely short video filmed by Asha, a charity organization in the slums of New Delhi, founded by the courageous and saintly Dr. Kiran Martin. It is amazing to see how people risk their lives to help others. The video is accompanied by the lovely hymn, *Abide with Me*. And what does **Asha** mean? **Hope:** "we had hoped" — we *do* hope.

Good Shepherds, Bandits, and the Pandemic

May 2, 2020

During the first weeks of the Easter season we were blessed with vivid, surprising, and in the end comforting stories of the resurrection and first appearances of Jesus. We could spend weeks more on the same readings.

But now, on this 4th Sunday of Easter (May 3), we find rather unexpectedly the opening verses of John 10:

> Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep… (10.1-2)

Why these verses today? On the surface, the choice of this chapter is related to the liturgical custom that this is Good Shepherd Sunday. Yes, but alas, it is only next year, 2021, that the really famous part of the chapter is heard: "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep…" (10.11) Today we are faced with the more obscure image of the gate where sheep go in and go out.

But why does John even introduce the figure of speech of sheep and shepherds, gates, etc.? A clue (which I picked up from Karoline Lewis' fine 2014 commentary on John) is that John 10 is not a new start, but is to be read as continuing John 9, which we read in Lent. There, the man born blind was cured, but religious leaders (John's very unfortunately labeled "the Jews") cannot believe their eyes, cannot see that the man now sees. That chapter ends on a dark note:

> Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, “Surely we are not blind, are we?” Jesus said to them, “If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains. (9.40-41)

John 10 follows immediately, simply as if Jesus is continuing to speak to them:

> Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers. (10.1-5)

There is intimacy and safety in the work of a reliable gatekeeper – an honest religious leader? – and in the fact that the flock recognizes the voice of their own shepherd. Sheep are, they say, rather stupid, but they are not stupid enough to follow bandits and strangers who will do them only harm. Like the man born blind, the sheep know who is on their side, and instinctively stay with that person: pay attention to what you see, listen for the voice that will guide you.

When (as is often the case in this Gospel) the listeners do not understand what Jesus is talking about, he tries again:

> So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.

Jesus is now the gate, the doorway into the safe space protected from thieves, bandits, killers, and he is the doorway out from there, into nourishing, safe fields for pasture. This again seems to be pushback against the skeptical leaders we meet in John 9: "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy." (10.10) They want those born blind to stay blind for life. But Jesus wants to open eyes and open gates, as today’s Gospel ends:

> I have come that you may have life, and have it abundantly. (10.10)

Jesus wants us to live life to the full, in safety, at peace. Yet the famed sequel is both beautiful and ominous: “I am the good shepherd… who lays down his life for his sheep” (10.11). Those who do good often pay with their lives, again in conflict with leaders who stifle life and deny flourishing.

Later we learn that Jesus wants more and more people to share in this abundance of life, all those who can recognize and hear his voice:

> I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they too will listen to my voice. (10.16)

But for now, things end a bit confused, a bit unhappily. Those who refused to accept the cure of the blind man also reject the very idea that leadership is about protection, community, life, inclusion:

> Again they were divided because of these words. Many of them were saying, “He has a demon and is out of his mind. Why listen to him?” Others were saying, “These are not the words of one who has a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?” (10.19-21)

Does all this shed any light on our current crisis? Perhaps the words of today’s Gospel offer a realistic, unromantic view of leaders, here and around the globe: some are robbers who intend no good, but want to steal life and use it up for their own pleasure; and some are shepherds who know their people, stay with them, protect them, and seek to make possible a return to the greener pastures of safety, nourishment, life in abundance.

When preaching on this Gospel in 2017, Pope Francis put it this way,

> "Jesus, Good Shepherd and door of the sheep, is a leader whose authority is expressed in service, a leader who, in order to command, gives his life and does not ask others to sacrifice theirs. One can trust in a leader like this, as the sheep who heed their shepherd's voice because they know that with him one goes to good and abundant pastures. A signal, a call suffices, and they follow; they obey; they begin to walk, guided by the voice of the One whom they feel as a friendly presence, strong and mild at once, who calls, protects, consoles and soothes."

Leaders worthy of respect do good, not harm; thieves pretend to be leaders, but steal the lives of others to improve their own. We are not sheep, we have brains and we need to use them. But even sheep figure out who to trust! During this pandemic, let's keep our eyes open and ears tuned, to recognize, both in church and in the wider society, who is actually doing something, who is actually helping people in a time of peril near and far: nurses and doctors; the police and safety officials; the women and men who keep the trains and buses running; the workers near and far who keep the food supply coming; the prudent governors and mayors who with great care and responsibility plan cautiously for the "return to normal;" and the epidemiology experts who keep the hard but honest facts before our eyes. All good shepherds, in their own way, all doing the work of our Good Shepherd.

The 4th Sunday of Easter is also, again by recent Church tradition, a day to pray for vocations to the priesthood and religious life. Here too, the same questions arise: Who in the Church are actually role models in this time of crisis? Which religious leaders are in essence doing nothing? And what kind of church leaders do we want after the pandemic is over?

Knowing Christ in the Love We Do

May 9, 2020

As the Gospel for today, May 10, the 5th Sunday of Easter, we hear the opening part of John 14, the beginning of what has been called Jesus' Last Supper discourse. It captures an intense and sad moment: even after the public ministry of Jesus, even after spending much time with him over several years, and less than an hour before Jesus is arrested and less than a day before he dies — his closest companions do not really know him:

> And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going."
>
> Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.
>
> If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him."
>
> Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? (John 14.3-9)

If showing doesn't work, then how do we know God? Back up for a minute: last week we saw that John 10 (on sheep who naturally recognize the voice of their shepherd) makes more sense if you read it as continuing the narrative from John 9 (on the man born blind who naturally sees better than those who think they see). Likewise, John 14 is easier to understand if we remember John 13: seeing what a person does comes first, before truly knowing who that person is. In John 13, Jesus acted. He knelt down and washed the feet of his disciples. Now he asks them, Do you still not know me?

They are thinking that he is going somewhere else, God's heaven, where they can't see what's going on. But he is the truth of God, God as truth; he is the way to God, the way to here; he is life with God because life is where Jesus is, even on the night before his death. God is intensely present right now, he is telling them: I just washed your feet, I am everything you have ever hoped for, here and now. See me, see God, see the goal and the way to the goal, see death and life over death, here and now. Why wait?

And now in a wider context:

Today also gives us as a first reading Acts of the Apostles 6.

> And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables. Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word." What they said pleased the whole community, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. (Acts 6.2-6)

These first deacons are called to serve the growing community at table, making sure everyone has a place, everyone is welcome, everyone is fed. Needing deacons is about needing people who can act, organize, serve: teach me by what you do, not by what you say. Yes, we may be puzzled that in the following chapters we hear more about only two of the deacons, Stephen and Philip — who are known rather as preachers. But perhaps it is assumed that they did actually spend much time organizing meals, serving at table, and learned to speak from that experience: if you have fed the hungry and served at table, then your word has credibility, and then you can preach, even if you are not one of those who knew Jesus personally. (Stephen and Philip had never met Jesus.) Serve, then talk: once we see what you do, we will listen to you, as God's love flows through your word.

Today is another day deep in the pandemic. Most of us are still seeking ways to survive but also to serve — at table, in caring for those in need, by holding our families together, by consoling the displaced and dismayed. We want to *do* something, but doing is not the end of it. Take the time to know the people you serve, to know the people who are caring for you. See what they do, and learn from them as persons. If we go deeper and realize who we are, simply as fellow humans, we will see God present right here, now. Really? God present in the pandemic? Why not — it's like God being fully alive and present in Jesus just a few hours before he died, the intensity of life fully realized in the face of death.

Today is Mother's Day. Happy Mother's Day to every mother reading this! Here too, deeds come before anything else. As children we know our mothers first in what they have done for us — in the original moment of love, in the womb, in every waking, sleeping and sleepless moment of childhood and growing up, and in sticking with us no matter how old we get to be. But hopefully, there is still more: may our mothers live long enough and may we grow up soon enough, that we come know our mothers as the real persons they are, who have loved us beginning and end, in deed, in word, in presence.

So many uncertainties, so many possibilities. But we should hope. After all, Jesus had the very greatest hope in us, because the way to God goes in both directions:

> Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me. But if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. (John 14.11-12)

Bonus: Yesterday Sarah Pasternak (of Our Lady of Sorrows parish) gave me a link to this lovely Zoomed group-singing of "Be Not Afraid" by Bob Dufford, SJ. (This site is very popular, so if you can't get in the first times, keep trying...)

In the Springtime of the Spirit (in lieu of a homily)

May 16, 2020

I was very pleased this week when Fr. Frank Daly, Pastor at Our Lady of Sorrows, invited me to preside at the videotaped Eucharist for the 6th Sunday of Easter (May 17), which you can see here. These weekly Masses have been a wonderful way of keeping us together!
So I need not write out a homily on John 14:

> If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. "I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them. (14.15-21)

But since I am a writer at heart, just a few words…

When we hear this Gospel passage, we are past the tipping point of the Easter season, and are now heading swiftly toward Pentecost (May 31), the public pouring forth of the Spirit upon God's people.

Yet when Jesus speaks these words, it is not Pentecost. Rather, impending doom and loss loom over John 14, since Jesus knew that his words about going and coming were not idle metaphors: he would be dead within 18 hours. He knew also, we might add, that for the next 2000+ years of the community's life, he would be present sometimes, absent sometimes, coming and going in mysterious ways.

But this is why his promise of the Spirit matters all the more, for this is the sure, enduring presence of God around us and within us, God's real presence - Real

Presence - wherever we happen to be. Jesus' promise bears repeating, in slight paraphrase:

> I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees nor knows the Spirit. *You know the Spirit, because the Spirit abides with you, and the Spirit will be in you.*

We may not be in church, nor receiving communion, but the Spirit is where we are: we are in God, and God is in us. There is nothing more real than this.

It makes sense then that at the beginning and end of the Gospel Jesus reminds the apostles, and therefore us, to keep his commandments. There are many, I am sure, but the one that comes to mind is surely the one he gave a moment before, at the end of the previous chapter:

> I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (13.34-35)

Where we are, right in every distanced place in which we live, *there* we enact our faith, *right here* in the love we show for one another and for all God's people in need. It is as easy — and dauntingly hard — as that, love lived and shared in ordinary times and places.

A weather note: We are already past the mid-point of May. Since I had been at Our Lady of Sorrows in Sharon last on March 8, visiting to film the Mass was also a pleasure in terms of the change in seasons. It was great to see how winter has truly gone away and spring has truly come to the town and the parish. If in April the fickleness of the winter-spring-winter weather seemed fitting to Lent and to the travails of pandemic, the surely, quietly warming days of

May, the green of new grass and leaves, and the blossoming of so many flowers are also a sign: new life, new hope for us all.

Waiting for the Spirit, Learning to Breathe

May 23, 2020

The Easter season is almost over. Ascension Thursday is just behind us (May 21), and on May 31 we will celebrate the great feast of Pentecost (50 days since Easter), a feast which more or less coincides with the Hebrew feast of Shavuot (Weeks), a harvest festival celebrated seven weeks after Passover. To anticipate next week's readings, the scene is vividly depicted by Luke in the second chapter of the Acts of the Apostles:

"When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them…" (Acts 2.1-3)

So we have much to look forward as we quickly now move forward, mindful of Jesus' promise from last Sunday: "And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you." (John 14)

The main point though for this Seventh Sunday of Easter (May 24) is a simpler one: the utter quiet of prayerful watching and waiting. The earliest community is together, just praying and waiting: no sermons, no good works, no miracles. Jesus is gone (there will be no more post-Resurrection appearances), and the future is uncertain, despite promises made. They gather in the upper room, perhaps where the Last Supper had taken place a few weeks before. The room must be rather crowded, since the twelve apostles are there, and — and thankfully, in Luke's generous view of the earliest community — also right with them the women closest to Jesus, and his mother Mary, and his brothers too:

> They returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away. When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer and were of one heart, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers. (1.12-14)

They pray, they persevere in prayer, day after day after day, presumably in keeping with their Jewish tradition. This in itself is a model of the earliest Church: men and women gathered, praying and keeping at praying, even in those uncertain times that seem bounded by the absence of Christ and delay of the Spirit.

Luke says that they are of "of one heart" (*homo-thumadon*: of one mind, one spirit), diverse women and men already deeply one. The Spirit present even before Pentecost, when like-minded and like-hearted women and men hold steady in a common cause, neither running away nor pretending the current moment is back to business as usual. One in heart, mind, spirit, they know that the one thing they can do is stay together with prayer and patience, and so they do.

This is for them a time of utter quiet, without a sense of what's next. They have not been told, after all, that Pentecost/Shavuot will be the day with the Spirit comes upon them. In an open-ended way that teaches us how better to pray, they wait in God's presence, no timeline, no deadline, no demand for something to happen. They simply wait upon God.

Us too. The end of May 2020 marks about ten weeks since the great shutdown and stay-at-home began. Yes, the churches will open soon, and though with masks and distances and awkward pauses, we will praying together again soon. But right now we are still in a time of watching, praying, waiting for God and God's Spirit. In these days before Pentecost, let us think of ourselves as learning to breathe again (in-spire, ex-spire, in the Spirit), learning again to pray, to be fully alive once more.

And we might imagine that the tongues of fire have already been hovering over us all this time, wherever we happen to have been. Now, as the dark turns to light, the fire of the Spirit is slowly undoing the scattering and separation, drawing all our small flames back to the source, in community. The many scattered flames are becoming one fire again.

Resources for the week: Rather than wait for the special hymns (sequences) of Pentecost until the day itself, we can begin to listen now. *Veni Sancte Spiritus* (Come Holy Spirit) is linked directly to Pentecost. Here is one lovely setting of Veni Sancte Spiritus, and another and one by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, and a lovely setting by John Michael Talbot. The wonderful *Veni Creator Spiritus* (Come, Creator, Spirit) is also most fitting, as in this simple chant. You can find on the web many other versions of each.

(The lovely painting in the middle of this post, which I found on the web, is by "Mykul Anjelo".)

"I can't breathe:" Needing Spirit at Pentecost

May 29, 2020

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. (2.1-4)

When we mark the feast of Pentecost (May 31), we are not simply remembering the gift of the Spirit and, as we say, the birthday of the Church 2000 years ago. Also very importantly, at this very moment, we are called to remember the need for breath, spirit, Spirit. If we cannot breathe, as a community and as every individual, we will be stifled, suffocated — and soon not alive at all. The gift of the Spirit is the promise and guarantee in every generation that we are called to be fully alive, as human beings and as Christians, because God infuses into us God's own breath. (It's always been this way; think of Genesis 1: *In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from Godswept over the face of the waters*.) This spirit/Spirit of God is both physical and spiritual – "a sound like the rush of a violent wind," even "divided tongues, as of fire."

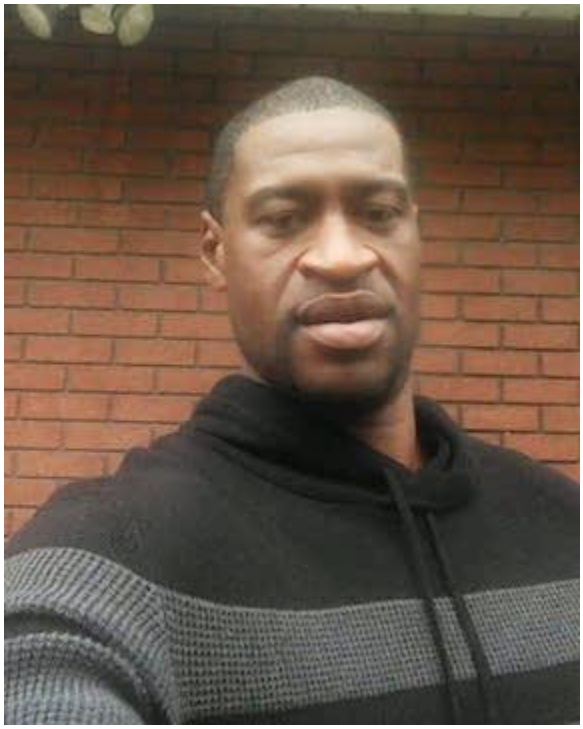
It is always the case that we need to come back to life and breathe again, but the reality is all the more poignant and tragic this year. Covid 19 is not over with. 100,000+ of Americans have died, while people in nearly every country on earth are suffering the virus invading their lungs, the shortness of breath, and the need for respirators, and in the end, an entire loss of breath, the dying that comes when there is no more spirit.

Such is a pandemic — an act of nature, what people used to call "an act of God" — but we also suffered this week a specific and horrific instance of one man stealing another's breath: the outrageous death of George Floyd due to the action of one Minneapolis policeman, who kept his knee on Mr. Floyd's neck for more than five minutes, even as the victim gasped, "I

can’t breath, I can’t breath.” Three other policemen watched, and did not intervene, despite the pleas of bystanders.

Who was George Floyd? Here is a simple account in the Chicago Tribune:

> "Before he died after being pinned for minutes beneath a Minneapolis police officer's knee, George Floyd was suffering the same fate as millions of Americans during the coronavirus pandemic: out of work and looking for a new job. Floyd moved to Minneapolis from his native Houston several years ago in hopes of finding work and starting a new life, said Christopher Harris, Floyd's lifelong friend. But he lost his job as a bouncer at a restaurant when Minnesota's governor issued a stay-at-home order.
>
> "On Monday night, an employee at a Minneapolis grocery store called police after Floyd allegedly tried to pass a counterfeit $20 bill. In widely circulated cellphone video of the subsequent arrest, Floyd, who was black, can be seen on the ground with his hands cuffed behind his back while Officer Derek Chauvin presses him to the pavement with his knee on Floyd’s neck. The video shows Chauvin, who is white, holding Floyd down for minutes as Floyd complains he can’t breathe. The video ends with paramedics lifting a limp Floyd onto a stretcher and placing him in an ambulance."



George Floyd could then, you might say, be any of us, seeking work, trying to survive when he had no money. And, more to the point, he was African American too, and suffered in a way that people like me (white, Harvard, 02138) rarely suffer. What happened is incomprehensible. If Mr. Floyd was already arrested, already on the ground, and already handcuffed — for maybe trying to pass a counterfeit $20! - what could Officer Chauvin possibly have imagined he was doing for that interminable and cruel time?

Terrifying scenes then to meditate on, on this Pentecost Sunday, death in nature, death by human choice: 100,000 Americans have died due to Covid 19, largely because they cannot breathe, and many, many more globally are losing their breath even as I write, as you read. “I can’t breathe,” cries Mr. Floyd, and his breath stolen from him.

Back to Pentecost: Let us remember the latter part of the reading, for the gift of the Spirit is the ability to speak loudly, boldly, with utter clarity and deep passion and compassion. Everyone heard those men and women who burst out of the upper room, unprepared, no script in hand, but speaking truth and hope in words every listener could understand.

> Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.” (2.5-13)

Powerful words: there is much to be said about the pandemic and our response to it, and much is being said right now about Mr Floyd’s tragic and entirely unnecessary death. I am not expert in the details of either the global or the local tragedy, but it seems to me that Acts is highlighting a particular kind of speaking: in the Spirit. The women and men in the upper room in an instant went from meditative and prayerful silence in a closed room to abruptly eloquent speech in the open air that touched the hearts of women and men from many different countries speaking many different languages. During all those days of waiting after the Ascension, they opened themselves, emptied themselves, breathing in and breathing out —and then one morning let the Spirit give them words to speak.

Think too of Mark 13:

> When they bring you to trial and hand you over, do not worry beforehand about what you are to say; but say whatever is given you at that time, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit. (13.11)

Wait for the Spirit: in a sense, we are off the hook. I am not the one to come up with a policy for reopening city and church in a safe way; I am not the one to come up with a plan for health care for every person who needs it, or short and long-term financial support for every person and family whose income has dried up; and I and not the one to be a leader in condemning violence in our country, particularly violence even by the police against African Americans. I need to stop and listen, to my sisters and brothers, and to my God. The Spirit may or may not give me wise or prophetic words to speak, and in the mean time I need not flatter my ego by opining on matters out of my depth.

But we *do* need to watch, listen, wait. Though much more needs to be said and to be done, I may not know my own role, until the tongue of fire touches my head. The same with you. For now we can at least be like the women and men in the upper room on Pentecost morning, that mixed gathering of apostles, relatives of Jesus, Mary his mother, and the women who followed him because they loved him: we need to be open, quiet, waiting, ready for the Spirit, who may – now, soon, later, perhaps – give you or me just the right words to speak, in a way that actually changes things. Let us, in a certain sense, hold our breath, waiting to speak or hear the right words in the face of the greater and smaller evils of this day.

And there's more: Marty Baron, editor of the Washington Post and editor of the Globe when the 2002 clerical sex abuse crisis exploded here in the Archdiocese, was the speaker at Harvard's virtual graduation ceremony on Thursday. He refers to the abuse scandal (first uncovered in the Phoenix, then pursued and spotlighted in the Globe) as a compelling case where freedom of the press has served humanity very well. On a day when we celebrate spirit-driven speech coming upon all nations, it is appropriate to reflect on free human speech, a free press, the need for brave journalists to tell the truth. You can find his speech here.

(Part of a series of Lenten, Easter, Pentecost homilies written for each Sunday during the time when my parish is shut down.)

The Trinity: God-with-Us in a World of Woe

June 6, 2020

We live in difficult, perilous, tragic times. Covid 19 is one of the most terrible disasters of the past several hundred years, surpassed perhaps only by the evils of world wars, and the systemic evil of poverty and oppression. And now, we have a small scale horror before us, the murder of George Floyd in public, seemingly cold and calculating, by a police officer sworn to protect the citizens of Minneapolis. The protests following the murder remind us white people of what most of us forget, the wholescale and systemic oppression of African Americans in our society, over the past four hundred years. So let's meditate on the Trinity, on this Trinity Sunday (June 7).

Really? It might seem off the topic, and a distraction, and a bit esoteric to turn to so complicated and arcane a topic. We might think that belief in God or trust in Jesus would be quite enough to inspire us to face up to reality and do the right thing. So who has time for the Trinity, right now? Yes, it is basic to our faith, from the sign of the cross to every blessing to each and every Eucharistic Prayer at Mass. So yes, we can affirm it, but why not then just move on?

But if we rush ahead without reflecting on this core truth of the faith, we miss the chance to think seriously about how God is present, and how God makes a difference. After all, we have so much work to do, but salvation, justice, protection of the sick and marginalized, the punishing of evil, are not things we do very well on our own. There are many resources in many religious traditions for thinking about God; as Christians, we can find the deepest source of energy for change right here, in the mystery of the Trinity.

I will focus, starting and ending just with today's first reading today from Exodus 34, since I find it to be most illuminative of God's presence in a very difficult world:

> So Moses cut two tablets of stone like the former ones; and he rose early in the morning and went up on Mount Sinai, as the Lord had commanded him, and took in his hand the two tablets of stone. The Lord descended in the

cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name, “The Lord.” The Lord passed before him, and proclaimed,

“The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation.”

And Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth, and worshiped. (Exodus 34.4b-6, 8)

It is important not to miss how difficult the circumstances are at this point in Exodus. The liberation from Egypt has taken place, the crossing of the Red Sea, the first giving of the Law at Sinai. Now things have taken a turn for the worse. (To see all this, go back and read Exodus 32-33.) Moses tarries on the mountain, so Aaron makes a golden calf and the people worship it. Moses defends the people against God’s annihilating wrath, but when he comes down the mountain, he manifests his own anger:

As soon as he came near the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, Moses’ anger burned hot, and he threw the tablets from his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain. He took the calf that they had made, burned it with fire, ground it to powder, scattered it on the water, and made the Israelites drink it. (32.19-20)

And to us, rather bizarrely, Moses tells the sons of Levi to kill thousands of their brothers, friends, and neighbors:

"When Moses saw that the people were running wild (for Aaron had let them run wild, to the derision of their enemies), then Moses stood in the gate of the camp, and said, 'Who is on the Lord’s side? Come to me!' And all the sons of Levi gathered around him. He said to them, 'Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, ‘Put your sword on your side, each of you! Go back and forth from gate to gate throughout the camp, and each of you kill your brother, your friend, and your neighbor.’ The sons of Levi did as Moses commanded, and about three thousand of the people fell on that day." (32.25-28)

All of this has no romance to it. It is not uplifting. It is in fact an unvarnished meditation on the hard and unvarnished truth of salvation in a cruel world: God in God's own mystery, distant and sometimes dangerous on the mountain, along with "God's people," a mass of humans beings, good and bad, saints and sinners, virtuous and tawdry, who've gotten themselves into a terrible mess yet again. This starts as God above and beyond us, and human beings who can always do worse. Hardly a soothing portrayal of "God and the children of God," but at least a first stage in understanding who God can be.

Thankfully, there is more to the Exodus narrative. Here too we have to step back and think about the whole scene at the mountain. First of all there is Moses, running up and down the mountain, explaining the people to God, buying time, asking mercy, and endlessly explaining God to the people, their hope and salvation. Through Moses God chooses to remain with the people, despite the great chasm between the top and bottom of the mountain. And most importantly there is the gift of the Law, a concrete and particular guide to life. Written on stone, destroyed, then patiently given again, the Law offers a sure path to follow. It is a Word that mediates, that is to guide the people when Sinai is only a distant memory. God in unfailing outreach and connection with us: this is the role Jesus too plays for Christians, of course, the flesh and blood mediator between the mysterious perfection of God and the human race. There is the Father, and there is the Son, both ever in relation to God's own people.

But there is more. The people have to move on. Staying at Sinai is not feasible, whatever good or bad may follow:

> But now go, lead the people to the place about which I have spoken to you; see, my angel shall go in front of you. Nevertheless, when the day comes for punishment, I will punish them for their sin. (32.34)

The people have to travel further out into the desert, finding their way in a strange unhospitable place and, perhaps in the end, finding a promised land (itself to be accompanied by a host of new problems through the ages). But Moses wants God to come with them:

> Moses said, "If now I have found favor in your sight, O Lord, I pray, let the Lord go with us. Although this is a stiff-necked people, pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your inheritance." (34.9)

God had offered, in Exodus 33, a kind of accompaniment -— "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest" (33.14) — but Moses is afraid to settle for " presence" that is less than God. We need *you*, Lord, *you yourself* to be with us! And so it is that God relents, and agrees. God's own Self will accompany his people wherever they go, into whatever uncharted space, uncertain future, troubles to come, new home to be sought and found. Is this not, for us Christians, the gift of

the Spirit? Not simply a God of mystery and unfathomable ways, nor a God who teaches and instructs us, but yet too God-always-with-God's-people.

Thus a Trinitarian understanding of the first reading at today's Mass. As long as we do not erase the Jewish understanding of the text, and as long as we respect other ways of seeing God and Moses and the people, we find in this reading insights into the mystery of God above us, with us, in us.

Back to where we started. The world is now in a time of monumental crisis. Covid 19 spreads and wreaks havoc globally (the decrease of cases here more than matched by increases elsewhere); Mr. Floyd's funeral is still to come, and sadly it is too easy to add more and more names to the list: Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Tony McDade, and on and on. The environment is still in a perilous and worsening state. We have miles to go in terms of cross-cultural and especially interreligious respect, learning and collaboration. We Catholics need to fix our Church, that we practice what we preach.

We will travel this arduous journey imperfectly: we will dally, worship golden calves, kill one another, deny what we've done, hide our omissions. We need again and again to enter the desert and meet God, always holy, sometimes terrifying, a God whose ways are not our ways; we need books and proven wisdom, we need the guidance of women and men who are mediators between God and ourselves, who walk in the footsteps of Moses and Jesus; and we need God with us in every new crisis, every uncharted wilderness. We need a God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, a God who acts through and in and despite us, in a world in dire need.

(This is a version of the homily I've already given for this Sunday, during the Mass posted at the parish website*.)*

Corpus Christi: Food for the Journey

June 13, 2020

This Sunday (June 14) is the Feast of Corpus Christi, the Body (and Blood) of Christ. It is the last Sunday feast in the long double season that began with Lent. Next Sunday we are back in what is called Ordinary Time. It is also the official start of the Archdiocesan Year of the Eucharist, which ends next year with the same feast (June 3, 2021). In case you'd not read it before, you can find the Cardinal's Letter on the theme of the year here.

Tarnished a little by the oddly out of time and place photo of a priest saying Mass with his back to the people, it is however a fine letter, with a fine theme:

> Recent times have been very difficult for the Church and her people. In the Year of the Eucharist, we all have the opportunity to renew and strengthen our faith and our closeness to the Lord. If we center ourselves in the Real Presence of Jesus, in His friendship, then everything else will make sense. At the celebration of Mass, Jesus is there, waiting for us, inviting us to the table where He is making a gift of Himself to us so that we may have the strength to make a gift of ourselves to others. That is what human fulfillment is about. It is about love and giving of ourselves on behalf of others. That is the meaning of the Eucharist, it is love taken to the extreme. The more we understand that, the more we will want to be present to the Eucharist and the more the Eucharist will transform us.

It is sad, ironic, but perhaps providential then that as this special year begins, we are quite far removed from traditional expectations about the Eucharist, real

presence and communion. For months we have not been gathering for the Eucharist; most of us have been unable to receive communion; few are able to visit the Blessed Sacrament; even now, as parishes start having Masses again, these Masses are uneasy and on edge, hedged in with rules that make Eucharistic community rather arduous. On this feast, we are still a distanced, scattered people.

But the bread of life is not bread just for comfortable times, but a gift from God, of God, that helps us to cross over death to life. As Jesus puts it in John 6, today's Gospel, in words spoken after he multiplies loaves and fishes to feed the women and men who had gathered to hear him:

> I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." (John 6.48-51)

Jesus' reference to the wilderness and the manna draws us back to a memory ancient already even in the time of Jesus: God's providing for his people even in the desert, when they were hungry, when they faced an uncertain future. That bread from heaven is not just for settled people, people at peace is a theme recurring in scripture. Think of the Jewish people, at the time of leaving Egypt making do with quickly made unleavened bread (Exodus 11); the manna God provided for the people in the desert (Exodus 16); the raven who brings food and drink to Elijah during his exile (I Kings 17); God providing food in the desert for Mary (Qur'an, Surah 19):

> So Mary conceived her son and withdrew with him to a place far off. And the pangs of childbirth drove her to the trunk of a date palm. She said, "Would that I had died before this and was a thing forgotten, utterly forgotten!" So he called out to her from below her, "Grieve not! Thy Lord has placed a rivulet beneath thee. And shake toward thyself the trunk of the date palm; fresh, ripe dates shall fall upon thee. So eat and drink and cool thine eye. (19: 22-26a; Study Qur'an tr.)

As is most often the case in the Torah, the message of Moses in Deuteronomy 8, from which today's first reading is drawn, is wonderfully concrete, down to earth:

> This entire commandment that I command you today you must diligently observe, so that you may live and increase, and go in and occupy the land that the Lord promised on oath to your ancestors. Remember the long way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments. He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does

not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.

The clothes on your back did not wear out and your feet did not swell these forty years. Know then in your heart that as a parent disciplines a child so the Lord your God disciplines you. Therefore keep the commandments of the Lord your God, by walking in his ways and by fearing him. For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, a land where you may eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron and from whose hills you may mine copper. You shall eat your fill and bless the Lord your God for the good land that he has given you. (Deuteronomy 8:1-10)

Word and/as bread: Feeding, clothing, protecting, guiding a desperate pilgrim people, refugees in the desert; a word, promise, of being-with the people: this is the bread from heaven that we remember this year, in the Eucharist and in every other place too.

2020 is a year of environmental disaster, pandemic, the collapse of civility in society, and the hateful poison of racism once again showing its ugliness and malevolence, hurting the most vulnerable in our society — and in ways many of us cannot see, because we happen to be safe, at a distance. Yet we all know something is wrong. The New York Times on June 12 reported the sense of unease and even dread pervading American society, with this paragraph capturing the essence of the matter:

> Five months from a crucial presidential election, the usual political debates, campaign events and policy fights have faded into the background for voters battered by a public health crisis, struggling through an economic recession and boiling over with fury over racial inequities. With tens of millions unemployed, more than 110,000 killed by the coronavirus and thousands of people protesting in the streets, Americans see their personal concerns and political choices through a strikingly existential lens — mourning the past, worried about the present and fearful of the future. (Lisa Lerer and David Umhoefer)

What shall our country be like by the end of the Eucharistic year next June? We do not know.

So in this time of life and death, perhaps it is best to retrieve another old Catholic term related to the Eucharist: viaticum:

> The word *viaticum* is a Latin word meaning "provision for a journey," from *via,* or "way". *Viaticum* can refer to an ancient Roman provision or allowance for traveling, originally of transportation and supplies, later of money, made to officials on public missions; mostly simply, the word, a haplology of *viā tēcum* ("with you on the way"), indicates money or necessities for any journey…

In Catholic tradition, viaticum is communion brought to the dying, food for the journey through death and new life:

> For Communion as Viaticum, the Eucharist is given in the usual form, with the added words "May the Lord Jesus Christ protect you and lead you to eternal life". The Eucharist is seen as the ideal spiritual food to strengthen a dying person for the journey from this world to life after death. (Wikipedia)

We need viaticum for 2020, God-with-us-as-our-nourishment-on-the-road. The promise of today's feast is that Christ is with us wherever we are, nourishing us with daily bread for the next steps in the journey of the weeks and months ahead. If we keep moving and do not settle for comfortable old ways and not blind ourselves to the suffering around us, God will keep feeding us, present and life-nourishing. So let us accept the reality of our times in this year of the Eucharist. We can seek to live out the Cardinal's words: *the Eucharist is about love, about giving of ourselves on behalf of others — a love taken to the extreme.* Even when we do not have bread, we live out that presence of Christ in our bodies, our words, our deeds.

For listening: There is a beautiful sequence for Corpus Christi, a long hymn inserted after the second reading and before the Gospel: *Praise Sion* (Lauda Sion). It is a long theological reflection on the meaning of the Eucharist, by St. Thomas Aquinas, the great medieval theologian. It is of course greatly in need of reinterpretation today, but it remains a beautiful hymn. Try this version with subtitles. The short and even more beautiful Bread of Angels (*Panis Angelicus*), taken from a longer hymn by Aquinas, also speaks to our feast. You can find settings here and here.

Note: For loyal readers who have read this far: I began this series early in Lent, and this is the 14th homily in a series that has gone on far longer than I imagined. I am thinking of ending it soon, now that Our Lady of Sorrows and other parishes are reopening. But if you have thoughts on this, let me know. (fclooney@hds.harvard.edu)

Juneteenth and the Sacred Heart, in Ordinary Time

June 20, 2020

"Ordinary Time" is an odd expression, though familiar in the Catholic context: all those Sundays and weeks of the liturgical year that are not in special seasons (Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter). On a three year cycle, the Gospels are read through, with a first reading from the Hebrew Bible thought to be paired with the Gospel, and a second reading usually from St. Paul. We broke off Ordinary Time on February 23rd, the 7th Sunday; today, June 21, is the 12th Sunday in Ordinary Time. (And it is, of course, Father's Day – congratulations to all the fathers in the parish! And let us all remember our fathers living and deceased.)

Our readings offer a rough return to Ordinary Time. Particularly as taken out of context, Jeremiah 20 and Matthew 10 are quite abrupt and bracing. Matthew 10 is Jesus' instruction to his disciples when he sends them out on mission, and today we have a key portion, which manages to be both comforting and jarring (particularly if you add, as I have, verses 34-36):

> So do not be afraid of them, for there is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. What I tell you in the dark, speak in the daylight; what is whispered in your ear, proclaim from the roofs. Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father's care. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows. "Whoever acknowledges me before others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before others, I will disown before my Father in heaven. "Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—a man's enemies will be the members of his own household.' (Matthew 10.26-36)

If Jesus is explaining what his disciples are likely to encounter and possibly suffer in the course of mission, the prophet Jeremiah embodies the actual suffering of a prophet whose message is unwelcome. The official reading is only Jeremiah 20:10-13, but here is a slightly longer portion that gives a feel for the depth of his struggle, the ups and downs of his emotions:

> You deceived me, Lord, and I was deceived; you overpowered me and prevailed. I am ridiculed all day long; everyone mocks me.

He cannot but speak in God's name, even if both enemies and friends turn against him:

> Whenever I speak, I cry out proclaiming violence and destruction. So the word of the Lord has brought me insult and reproach all day long. But if I say, "I will not mention his word or speak anymore in his name," his word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot. I hear many whispering, "Terror on every side! Denounce him! Let's denounce him!" All my friends are waiting for me to slip, saying, "Perhaps he will be deceived; then we will prevail over him and take our revenge on him."

Then Jeremiah is uplifted and consoled:

> But the Lord is with me like a mighty warrior; so my persecutors will stumble and not prevail. They will fail and be thoroughly disgraced; their dishonor will never be forgotten. Lord Almighty, you who examine the righteous and probe the heart and mind, let me see your vengeance on them, for to you I have committed my cause. Sing to the Lord! Give praise to the Lord! He rescues the life of the needy from the hands of the wicked.

But it is not over as he falls again into near despair:

> Cursed be the day I was born! May the day my mother bore me not be blessed! Cursed be the man who brought my father the news, who made him very glad, saying, "A child is born to you—a son! (Jeremiah 20.7-15)

There is no neat ending, no quick vindication of the good man right now. Jeremiah is down, he is up, he is very much down. In the end, he will be at peace, but not now. Thus goes his ministry.

But the ambivalence in both readings is good for us, particularly in June 2020, since it helps us to wake up and give energy to what we mean by "ordinary time." We can discard the idea that such ordinary times are calm and tranquil times.

And this point hits home for two reasons connected to this weekend – particularly to Friday, June 19, just several days ago. As I hope we all know at this point, June 19th is "Juneteenth," which marks the day in 1865 when all the slaves in Texas were declared to be free, when emancipation began to take hold in a space where the Emancipation Proclamation had not reached. Here is how Wikipedia puts it, both the good news and the rather grim restrictions the General kept in place:

> On June 18, 1865, Union Army General Gordon Granger arrived at Galveston Island with 2,000 federal troops to occupy Texas on behalf of the federal government. The following day, standing on the balcony of Galveston's Ashton Villa, Granger read aloud the contents of "General Order No. 3", announcing the total emancipation of those held as slaves: "The people of Texas are informed that, in accordance with a proclamation from the Executive of the United States, all slaves are free. This involves an absolute equality of personal rights and rights of property between former masters and slaves, and the connection heretofore existing between them becomes that between employer and hired labor. *The freedmen are advised to remain quietly at their present homes and work for wages. They are informed that they will not be allowed to collect at military posts and that they will not be supported in idleness either there or elsewhere*."

I have been told that Juneteenth has been for a very long time a day of commemoration and celebration in African American communities, and now the rest of us are catching up. (Harvard declared a holiday on Friday for the first time, and so too New York City.) But Juneteenth, blessed as the day may be, was only a beginning. Even 155 years later, it is sadly obvious that there is much more to be done if we are to have a society where all are equal, safe, free.

Even in the 12th Week of Ordinary Time in 2020, the prophets of racial justice will not always be welcome, the work of speaking God's word and good news of liberation is only under way, not near completion. We still need a Jeremiah to speak truth to power, and persist even when those in power want to kill you; we still need for women and men to do the work of Jesus in the world, going from town to town preaching the kingdom of God, acting and speaking like Jesus in places familiar and new; and always there is a need for Jesus himself, of course, to manifest God's kingdom, expose violence, unsettle the comfortable, and give fresh hope and energy to those in trouble and those in solidarity.

But we ought not to take for granted this Jesus — as if he were a maestro, God in full control, directing things, providing happy endings. This is brought home by the other dimension of June 19th this year: the Feast of the Sacred Heart. This feast has at least medieval roots, but it became popular in the 17th century, through the visions of Saint Margaret Mary Alacoque (1647-1690), with the strong support of the Jesuit saint, Claude de la Colombiere (1641-1692).

Symbolized usually by Jesus showing the viewer his heart, crowned in thorns or not, this is a feast of God's most intense, flesh-and-blood love for the human race. It is a gut-level and inevitably suffering love, God in, amid, sharing the suffering of the human race. John 19 puts all this before us:

Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to her, "Woman, here is your son," and to the disciple, "Here is your mother." From that time on, this disciple took her into his home. Then, knowing that everything had now been finished, and so that the scripture might be fulfilled, Jesus said, "I am thirsty." A jar of wine vinegar was there, so they soaked a sponge in it, put the sponge on a stalk of the hyssop plant, and lifted it to Jesus' lips. When he had received the drink, Jesus said, "It is finished." With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

Since it was the day of Preparation, they did not want the bodies left on the cross during the sabbath, especially because that sabbath was a day of great solemnity. So they asked Pilate to have the legs of the crucified men broken and the bodies removed. Then the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first and of the other who had been crucified with him. But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. Instead, one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out. (He who saw this has testified so that you also may believe. His testimony is true, and he knows that he tells the truth.) These things occurred so that the scripture might be fulfilled, "None of his bones shall be broken." And again another passage of scripture says, "They will look on the one whom they have pierced." (John 19.25-37)

If we look upon those who have been pierced, are being pierced, there we will see Christ, God for us, God with us: Jesus who died due to loving us; Jeremiah who suffered bitterly because he loved his people; the myriad generous and selfless people who in these last few months have risked their lives in caring for the sick and dying; those who have kept basic services going and gotten sick themselves; and those who have cried out, “Black Lives Matter!” and “Get off our necks!” in the face of our taken-for-granted, sinful ordinary ways of living as Americans.

If we see all this, then we will see how Juneteenth, the Sacred Heart, and prophets-like-Jesus do belong together — on this not so ordinary 12th Sunday in Ordinary Time.

Note: after finishing this homily, I realized belatedly that June 21 is also the feast of Aloysius Gonzaga (1568-1591) the young Jesuit who died at age 23, after just a few years as a Jesuit - because he caught the plague from victims he was daily ministering to, caution to the wind. A saint for our times, indeed.

Musical bonus: Kathleen Connolly Rosenberg, a reader of these homilies from Virginia, just now wrote to me, seeing the mention of Jeremiah, to recommend The Cry of Jeremiah: "a very moving work for narrator, chorus and orchestra, composed in 2012 by Rosephayne Powell, an African American composer. Here is the NY premiere performance, narrated by the composer and conducted by her husband."

Welcoming Those God Sends to Us

June 27, 2020

The 13th Sunday in Ordinary Time continues last Sunday's reading from Matthew 10, now reaching the end of the chapter. The key part lies in these verses:

> Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me, and anyone who welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.
>
> Whoever welcomes a prophet as a prophet will receive a prophet's reward.
>
> Whoever welcomes a righteous person as a righteous person will receive a righteous person's reward.
>
> And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones who is my disciple, truly I tell you, that person will certainly not lose their reward. (10.40-42)

The maxims are clear: as we welcome, as we serve, so we benefit and are blessed.

But who are we talking about? 10.40 is largely clear, since in this chapter Jesus is speaking to his *apostles*: welcoming the apostles is welcoming Jesus, and welcoming Jesus is welcoming God. By extension, today we might suppose for a moment that the apostles are akin to the ordained leaders of the Church, bishops, priests, deacons. 10.41 brings in two further groups aside from the apostles: *prophets* and *righteous persons*. Let us say that the prophets are people who, ordained or not, are given the word of God to speak, and duly speak in God's name. The righteous perhaps represent a still wider category, those who live righteous lives and preach by acts of service good example. When we welcome such figures into our lives, we receive the rewards they receive, sharing in the words and actions of the Christian life. 10.42 speaks of the *little ones*, a category we could define in terms of lack of wealth or power or social status — but perhaps more easily, it might refer to the "ordinary people" of a community — our sisters and brothers, ourselves — who do not feel themselves to have any particular mission or office. If we care for each other on this level — ordinary people offering ordinary cups of cold water to other ordinary people — then too there will be a reward: the knowledge of God in Christ that is at the heart of the mission.

Even if more could be said (we can imagine God speaking to us through still others, well outside the Church community) for now this is enough. Jesus' calculus is somewhat clear by the end of Matthew 10, both for those who work and speak in

Christ's name, and those who welcome the word and ministry of others in the community.

But even the clearest of instructions are more complicated in real life, and in the readings for this Sunday, clarification by way of example may be the purpose in pairing Matthew 10 with 2 Kings 4. This chapter is part of the saga of Elisha, the mighty successor to Elijah. Having inherited the authority and (literally) the mantle of Elijah, Elisha is traveling around with his company of attending prophets. The chapter is too long (44 verses) to quote here – though you can look it up – but fascinating not just in the tiny part of it given as today's reading (4:8-11, 14-16a). Some highlights:

• The widow of a prophet appeals for his help, since the creditors are coming to carry off her two children into slavery, to pay unpaid debts; Elisha creates for her an enormous amount of cooking oil, which she sells to pay the debts. (4.1-7)

• In Shunem, a wealthy lady invites Elisha in for a meal; he comes so often she gives him a room. He seek to repay her, and seeing that she is childless and her husband old, he promises her a child within a year's time, and so it is. (4.8-17)

• But the child gets sick with a terrible headache and then dies, sitting on her lap. She insists then on going on a journey to find Elisha, to rebuke him for giving her joy only to have it turn into sorrow. He sends his servant with his staff, to lay upon the child, but the woman will not accept this token of interest, instead making Elisha come to see the dead child. (4.18-30)

• Elisha arrives, lays down upon the corpse and brings the child back to life. The child sneezes seven times and is well again (4.31-37)

•During a famine, Elisha wants to feed the prophets with him, but a cook mistakenly adds poisonous gourds to the stew. The men almost die, but Elisha sprinkles flour on the stew, and it becomes edible. (4.38-41)

• He instructs his servants to feed the prophets, using twenty loaves of bread and fresh ears of grain given to him. This is not nearly enough, but at the Lord's word, the loaves and ears of grain turn out to be abundant, and there is even much left over. (4.42-44)

You must read II Kings 4 for yourself! Yet today the details may matter less, perhaps — though Jesus is an Elisha-like prophet — but the principle does: in a series of complicated encounters, noticing and meeting a person of God — apostle, prophet, righteous, or just a member of the community — gives an abundance of return: safety for oneself and one's family, the birth of a child, protection from physical and spiritual dangers, food for the hungry.

But as always, the most pertinent example of the meaning of Matthew 10.40-42 is ourselves, in our lives. We were not there with Elisha, and we were not there when Jesus spoke to his apostles, nor did we ever meet those apostles. We are Catholics, beneficiaries of a long tradition of women and men on mission, but right now many of us are not even going to church. So we need to be on the lookout in daily life for prophets, the righteous, and the ordinary folk next door:

> Whoever welcomes a prophet as a prophet will receive a prophet's reward. Whoever welcomes a righteous person as a righteous person will receive a righteous person's reward.
>
> And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones who is my disciple, truly I tell you, that person will certainly not lose their reward.

We need to be like Shunammite woman, attentive enough to recognize a real prophet when she sees one, bold and generous enough to offer Elisha meal, a place to stay; we need to be stubborn like her, expecting prophets to live up to their word; we need to be like Elisha, who protects a widow, who brings new life to the childless, who feeds his hungry companions. We need to keep our eyes open for all the direct and indirect ways God is meeting us in those around us on an ordinary day.

You might try an experiment: recollect in detail a recent day or two in your life, remembering the people you met, anyone who seemed to you like messengers straight from God, those who helped you, those you helped; those who did not abandon you when good things turned bad, those you reached out to when they were overwhelmed by troubles; those who nourished you, those you fed and made feel at home. Imagine that day or two, visualize the key people in it, and then re-read the instruction of Jesus: "Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me, and anyone who welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me…"

In this way, wherever we happen to be, the News comes to us in 2020 — by the apostle or prophet or righteous person or any of our sisters or brothers — offering hope and welcome, community and nourishment, in a divided and fearful world.

Take Refuge with the Lord (plus a tribute to Deacon Michael Iwanowicz)

July 4, 2020

> Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. (Matthew 11.28-29)

This lovely passage from the short Gospel for the 14th Sunday in Ordinary Time is an invitation which Jesus expresses in utterly clear terms: If you are weary and heavy burdened (by worries personal, of your family, for our country, for the earth itself) come to me; if you are tired out by all this and need rest for your soul, come to me. We don't need to do anything extraordinary, we need just to accept this invitation.

This is an elemental part of our faith, to come to the Lord, give over our burdens, and let him refresh us. We find the theme in the Psalms, and so often in the Gospels: at the feet of the Lord, you will find safety and rest. Given our many woes today this is a welcome message: give over to Christ our worries and cares, all of them — and do it today. Then you can do the work to which the Lord calls you.

This is not a uniquely Christian theme by any means. To put this world in perspective by giving its care over to God, the reality greater than time and space, is human and divine wisdom. This instinct is deep-rooted in Jewish piety — e.g., "Cast your cares on the Lord and he will sustain you; he will never let the righteous be shaken" (Psalm 55). The very word "Islam" indicates submission, surrender to God. In Buddhism, a core act defining the faith is taking refuge at the feet of the Buddha (*śaraṇam*).

In Hindu traditions, there are multiple examples of the invitation to come to the Lord — the God, in some cases the Goddess — and take refuge at the divine feet. In the famous Bhagavad Gītā's ultimate verse of importance, Lord Krishna puts it this way:

> Let go entirely of all your righteousness, and take refuge with me alone.

I will free you from your sins. Do not grieve. (Gita 18.66)

Or, in the Tamil language tradition of South India: the saint Nammalvar (9th c.), unable in every other way to find God, simply gives up self-salvation, and in the presence of the Goddess who ever mediates the presence of God, enters beneath the Lord's feet:

> "I cannot be away from You even for a moment,"
> Says the Lady on the flower who dwells on Your chest;
> You are unmatched in fame, the three worlds are Yours, You rule over me,
> O Lord of the holy Veṇkaṭam temple where peerless immortals and crowds of sages delight!
> With nowhere else to go, this servant has entered right beneath your feet. (*Holy Word of Mouth* 6.10.10)

South Indian followers of this tradition all it "going to refuge" (*śaraṇāgati*) or "laying down the burden" (*bhara-nyāsa*) or even most simply, "coming near (to the Lord)" (*prapatti*). Even today, followers of the Śrīvaiṣṇava faith live with the same goal of surrendering to the Lord. It is a deep value we can share interreligiously; it is a form of piety, but it is also world-transforming. (St. Ignatius Loyola had a version of it: "Pray as if everything depends on yourself; act as if everything depends on God.")

But traditions differ too. What distinguishes the invitation in Matthew 11 itself is the long lead-up, the preceding 27 verses of the chapter:

1-6 John the Baptist, in prison and soon to die, sends messengers to Jesus: are you really the One who is to come? Am I to die for the right person? (Perhaps many of us are like John at the moment: does the faith really work? should I stick with it?) Jesus responds: See what I do, what I say, and judge for yourself. The Good News is happening all around you. You did not waste your life.

7-15 Though somewhat stern in his reply to John, Jesus then testifies that John was indeed the greatest of the prophets, the one who points directly to the Messiah; yet anyone who follows Jesus in utter simplicity reaches a state beyond that of John.

16-19 Most people found excuses for ignoring John, and now for ignoring Jesus himself.

> 20-24 Even the people of Israel, who should have known better, failed to listen to John, and hearing Jesus speak, failed to see what was right before their eyes.
>
> 25-27 But who can be blamed? To listen to the prophets and understand John, and to see who Jesus is: that is a gift of God, given not to the wise and powerful, but to the simple and pure of heart. Many, if not most, don't have it.

All 27 verses are just a prelude to the invitation in 28-29. Here Jesus turns and addresses the listener, reader: in the time of decision, when people are deciding whether to listen or not, and many do not, it is up to you — you, who have just now been thinking about John the Baptist and heard the message of Jesus, do the simple and good thing: put down your baggage, come to me. You will find rest from all that wearies you. You can't live out your calling carrying all that stuff on your back!

Jesus adds,

> For my yoke is easy and my burden is light. (11.30)

What is this "light burden"? In Matthew 11 it may ironically be the burden carried by John the Baptist: trust in Jesus, gamble that he is the One, even when you are not sure, even when you, John, could have declared yourself the Messiah and been cheered on by very large crowds at the Jordan River and all the way to Jerusalem. The light burden — just let go! — is to cast aside ego, stop making the faith more complicated than it is, stop judging yourself so harshly as to make your own judgments a barrier to taking refuge with Jesus. Come as you are, right now. John the Baptist did it, even while still questioning. Thomas the Apostle (July 3) did it, even while still doubting. Us too, in the endlessly long summer of 2020: let go, stop tripping over our own feet, accept the invitation of Jesus, let him take up our burdens.

All of this is deeply consoling, but it is not escapism. Once we've put our lives in God's hands, *then* the mission begins. (As in the picture just above, Robert de Niro cut loose from his mercenary baggage in that Jesuit classic, *The Mission*.)

In Memory of Deacon Michael A. Iwanowicz (with a full obituary here)

I think Deacon Mike Iwanowicz would be pleased that I offer this reflection on his life and work not in a separate post, but as an afterword to a reflection on the Gospel for the 14th Sunday in Ordinary Time. As a deacon, Mike lived by the Word he served. He always listened so carefully. I myself am very grateful for this. He was attentive to my homilies over the years, sure to offer a kind and insightful comments. His last email to me on June 21 offered his clear and measured assessment of what my written homilies have accomplished, and why this series should continue.

As most readers know, Deacon Mike was a proud member of the first class of deacons in the Archdiocese of Boston in 1976, and until his retirement as deacon, devoted himself thoroughly to his ministry at Our Lady of Sorrows. He was always present at the Sunday Eucharist, serving as deacon at nearly every Mass, and he was there all week long too. He preached on occasion, always bringing into his reflections his impressive knowledge of Church matters near and far, and always drawing from the deep well of his personal experience as a family man, a man with practical experience in a way that many priests lack (though of course we are now blessed with a pastor, Fr. Frank Daly, who also has children and grandchildren).

I first met Mike when I started coming to the parish in the late summer of 1997. In those days he was the great collaborator and conversation partner of Fr. Robert Bullock. Together they studied and discussed the vision of the Vatican II Church. Together they worked tirelessly with the wonderful Catholics of OLOS to make the Church take root and flourish in Sharon, despite setbacks, most notably the sex abuse scandal that erupted in 2002. Through parish ministries, Bible study, book clubs and study groups, and of course preaching now and then, Mike worked tirelessly to grow the parish community. Most years, Mike preached on the Feast of the Holy Family, and that gave him a chance to reflect on his own family life, his beloved wife Pat, and their children of whom he was so proud.

And for those of us who were here at the time of Bob Bullock's death in June 2004: who could forget how Mike stepped in the vacuum, and without fanfare gathered and led the parish for the four months before Fr. Scott Euvrard arrived in the fall? Some of you reading this will remember the Sunday in late summer when Mike gave a summary of where things stood, what the parish still didn't know about when we'd have a new pastor, but how we were managing in the meantime. The response from the congregation was simple and straightforward: a standing ovation, prolonged applause, a showering of love and gratitude. Mike was a true deacon, true servant of the people of God, a true embodiment of what Church leadership can be when it is lived on the ground, as a way of life.

I am sure we will have a memorial at OLOS later on, when it is possible again to gather in larger numbers. But for now, I leave the last word to Mike. In 2010, during the decade when my blogs were being posted at the *In All Things* site of *America* magazine, I invited Mike to take over for several weeks, to speak of his life and vocation as a deacon. You can find the first one here and and the second here.

When Nature Shows Us God

July 10, 2020

One of the challenges of the Common Lectionary followed by the Catholic and other Christian communities is that the assigned readings for Sundays — over a three year cycle — are not geared to current events. They often have little to do with what's happening right now. A preacher too often has a choice: preach on current events or preach on the readings: bring the world into the Word, or the Word into the world. (Both, of course, but that's hard.)

This Sunday, the 15th Sunday in Ordinary Time, is a fine exception. All three readings refer to the natural world, asking us to learn spiritual truths by appreciating how nature works, by not taking nature for granted, and by learning to see God through nature.

That we should learn of God from nature is a message coming at the right time. Summer, after all, is a season when we can pay more attention to nature, the beauty and fruitfulness of the world around us. Nature can also distress us. Covid 19 is a terrible force of nature that is absolutely relentless and murderous, no respecter of us and our preferences; it is like an earthquake or forest fire or tsunami, except global all at once. And the whole earth itself is in deep trouble, as it gets hotter and hotter, as animal and plant species go extinct, as changes in climate create havoc for us and all living beings.

The readings speak of nature. But what do they say to us about the beauty of nature — and also about its many woes? To put it simply: nature shows us something of God, something of ourselves. We ignore nature at our peril. Let us take up the three readings one by one.

In Isaiah 55, the Lord is heard comparing the regularity of the rainfall, which makes life possible on earth, with the Word that God speaks; what comes forth from God's mouth does not fail to achieve its results:

> For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
> and do not return there until they have watered the earth,
> making it bring forth and sprout,
> giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
> so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
> it shall not return to me empty,
> but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
> and succeed in the thing for which I sent it. (Isaiah 55.10-11)

Think about rain. Think of how important, and taken for granted (here in New England at least) it is, enough but not too much, to keep things alive and fresh and growing. The rain is a gift, God's Word is a gift. It is not up to us to save the world ourselves, it is something God does, is doing, will do, as surely as the rain falls and the crops grow. Relax.

But nature is not all sweetness and light. The most regular rainfall still needs seeds for the growing, and good soil in which those seeds can take root and grow to fruition. In Matthew 13, Jesus reminds us that neither life in nature nor life by God's word are to be taken for granted:

> That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!" (Matthew 13.1-5)

Think about gardens in July. Go out into your garden if you have one, and ponder its success: what is growing well and showing signs that the fruits and vegetables are on the way? And what seems doubtful, like all the work may not pay off? Or take a look at your house plants — why is this one flourishing, that one looking sickly? Or go for a walk, and look at the plants and trees growing around us: what is growing well, what seems stunted? What is flourishing, what is sickly, what is already dead? We are like nature, blessed with great abundance, but we need to let grace take root in us, flourishing in the long run.

Most extraordinary is the second reading from St. Paul's Letter to the Romans, Chapter 8: if we are yearning for liberation and groaning amid current sufferings, remember that nature itself groans and yearns, caught up in the same problems that torment us. The Isaiah and Matthew passages draw analogies between the natural and the spiritual, but Paul seems to be speaking more literally. The natural world is suffering by disease and destruction and our neglect, and it too needs to be liberated. The suffering is real, but it shall not endure:

> I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. (Romans 8.18)

But it is not just human suffering. Paul expands the vista greatly, to include nature in the great vision of God's plan. The world itself is to be saved and healed, even as we are:

> For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. (8.19-21)

The natural and the human are both like a woman in labor, suffering until the joys of new life are given:

> We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of

the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. (8.22-23)

We have the Spirit alive in us, and we are waiting for reunion with God and for our true liberation. We: body and spirit, the human and the natural too, all of reality is suffering the pangs of new birth. Think about the world in trouble, fevered by Covid 19, devastated by human plunder — but don't stop with the gloom and doom. See also that this world is even now being taken up into God's mercy, to be healed and restored, a new creation.

On the broadest level, these readings invite us to see how God is and God acts by learning what nature has to teach us: if you would see the invisible, open your eyes to the world around you first. The readings remind us too that we cannot be well spiritually and with God, if the world around us is dried out, overheated, carved up and chopped down, ravaged by Covid 19. Can we not hope and pray that once again in our lifetimes the harmony of nature and spirit becomes clear?

But to end on a gentler note, perhaps also to extend our experience of a natural world fully alive in God, here are a few of my favorite texts, songs and poems that speak of God in nature, nature in God:

• The hymn of St. Francis, "Brother Sun, Sister Moon" (from the movie), and the related and familiar "Canticle of the Sun" by Marty Haugen

• By the American poet e e cummings, "I thank you God for most this amazing day" (read by the author) and read by a young poet

• Five nature poems by the Jesuit poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins:

"Pied Beauty" (read by the famed actor, Richard Burton)
"God's Grandeur"
"The Windhover"
"As Kingfishers Catch Fire"
and finally, Hopkins' melancholy "Spring and Fall to a Young Child" (sung)

Praying, Breathing

July 17, 2020

Many of us have lots of time on our hands these days, and nowhere to go; this is a stay at home summer for so many of us (even those blessed with a job and a roof over our heads, and good health). I am sure we are all still seeking ways to spend that time well.

Perhaps the thought even arises that we should pray more and pray better in a time like this. There are so many people to pray for; and we need prayer to deepen, purify, save our own lives too.

Fortunately then, this Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (July 19) provides us a chance to reflect on how we pray — and, surprisingly, to begin to see how natural, fundamental, and simple prayer really can be: the Spirit prays within us, our prayer is God's prayer.

How so? Last week Romans 8 showed the intimate relationship of humans and nature, all yearning and groaning for the liberation God offers. The continuation of Romans 8, just two verses this week, speaks to the deeper reality of prayer:

> Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. (Romans 8.26-27)

The Spirit is praying within us, whether we are able to pray well or not. This is God breathing in and breathing out, in and as our very life. The Spirit is interceding for us, lifting us up to God, by a sighing and breathing deeper than any of the thoughts and words we put together. This kind of prayer, the Spirit's praying, is as natural and necessary as breathing is to life. It reaches God immediately, not because we are perfect prayer-makers, but because this is the Spirit of God at work: God knows God's own Spirit, and so God knows us in the Spirit-praying-within-us, and in that way we brought into the great flow of God's will for the world. So just breathe in, breathe out: prayer is that easy. Relax; breathe; pray.

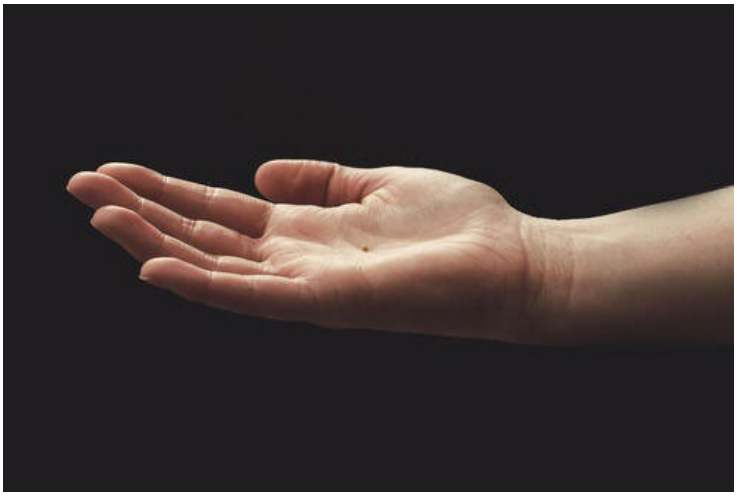
Really? In real life, we also know that praying certainly seems to be hard work: finding time for it; doing it regularly; praying not as we did in childhood, but now as adults; finding words that work, but also learning when to shut up in God's presence; even when we pray earnestly, we are easily distracted; we pray year after year, but praying seems not to get easier; we ask and we do not receive. So how can it be so simple as to say that the Spirit prays within us, even when we cannot, and beyond our thoughts and words?

By the chance of this week's set of readings, the three further parables of Jesus in Matthew 13 on the kingdom of God shed light on Paul's assurance that prayer is the hidden work of God within us. (For this to work, let us imagine, as we can, that Jesus' instruction on the mystery of God's kingdom is another way of talking about prayer. After all, as he says later on, "The kingdom of God is within you." [Luke 17.21]) These are the parable of the weeds and the wheat; the mustard seed; and the yeast in the loaf.

My prayer is so distracted, cluttered with weeds:

Jesus put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?' He answered, 'An enemy has done this.' The slaves said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' But he replied, 'No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.'" (Matthew 13.24-30)

Our prayer is often a mess, even our best insights, feelings, desires mixed in with lots of distractions, worthy or unworthy. We may be tempted to seek pure and perfect prayer, and to give up on our ordinary, distracted prayer. But Jesus suggests patience with the imperfect, since therein God dwells. The Spirit is not slowed up by our distractions, the wheat will thrive among the weeds, and in the end, there will be the harvest of God's kingdom to which prayer leads. How our prayer grows within us, changing us, is itself a mystery: "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how." (Mark 4.26-27)



Praying is too small part of my life:

He put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.” (13.31-32)

Even if we do pray well once in a way, it may seem a bit trivial — too little, too late — compared with the size of the problems facing us and the world around us. But as the parable tells us, even the smallest, tiniest bit of prayer is enough to become a great protection for ourselves and others in need. Or think of what Jesus says elsewhere: “For truly I tell you, if you only had faith the size of amustard seed, you could say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.” (Matthew 17.20) Even one moment of real prayer in the Spirit might be enough for a life time.

I pray, but nothing is happening:

> He told them a third parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in withthree measures of flour until all of it was leavened.” (13.33)

And finally, perhaps most frustrating, we pray and pray and nothing seems to be happening at all. Like St. Teresa of Avila, we keep an eye on our hourglass, our watch, our phone, to see when we can stop. In prayer, time can be interminable, since we are not used to letting time flow quietly, moment by moment. But in fact, like the yeast that secretly does its work, is the unseen inner movement of the Spirit that invisibly changes our flesh and blood, minds and hearts, in the place where God lives, the living Bread.

And so: prayer happens and draws us to God, even when we are distracted (forget the weeds); it happens when our prayer seems of no account (weigh that tiny mustard seed); and it happens when our efforts seem useless (you can't see the yeast even as it does its work). All this is the work of the Spirit within us, a Spirit that cannot really be frustrated no matter how hard we try to make prayer something we do or fail to do, on our own:

> Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.

Admit that is hard to pray, then succeed brilliantly by letting the Spirit pray within us, like breathing out and breathing in.

All this is why many spiritual masters, East and West, urge us to follow our breath as a way into quiet, leading us into prayer. Breathe in, breathe out, breathe in, breathe out, just honoring the very rhythm of life. If we see all this as a gift, our own meager, the-best-we-can-do prayers will lift us up into God's very presence.

And does this do any good for our troubled world in the summer of 2020? If we are not just praying about the world or for the world, but learning to let the Spirit of God pray within us, prayer can make a very large difference. Prayer of the Spirit within us is a portal between God and this world. With our every prayer, there is more of God in the world than there was before; and there is more of us in God. This isn't everything, it does not feed the hungry or end Covid 19 or achieve racial justice — but it makes God more present in our lives, and that presence is the foundation of the justice and hope we struggle for.

For further reading: St. Paul elsewhere says, “Pray always” (I Thessalonians 5.17). This prompted the writing of one of the most famous books in Russian spirituality, *The Way of a Pilgrim*. In this classic text, a poor man begins to wander around nineteenth century Russia, puzzling over Paul’s words and asking everyone he meets, “How is it possible to pray always?” He discovers the Jesus prayer — “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, have mercy on me” — and repeats it so often that it becomes as essential a part of his life, day and night, like breathing, like the beating of his heart. You can find out more about it here, and find an older translation of the whole book here.

Finding Wisdom in Everyday Life

July 24, 2020

There is plenty of misery to go around in July 2020: Covid 19, systemic racial injustice showing its ugliness for all to see, callous indifference to the vulnerable from the womb to the grave, homelessness and joblessness, degradation of the environment, killing off God's creatures large and small — and on and on. One of the hardest things is that most of us have lots of time on our hands, but have no clear idea what *we ought to do*. Certainly, I feel that way — who wants to be a guilty bystander when the world is on fire? How to act, consistently, bravely, realistically, in the face of even one of these crises? How to make a difference? Or to put it another way: How do we find the kingdom of heaven today — God's heavenly will becoming real here on earth?

Jesus was a practical man, even regarding the kingdom he preached. In the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) he did of course offer his vision of the kingdom – God's plan for the earth and human community realized in our living as God lives. But he was more often interested in helping his listeners to find the kingdom in practice, to act differently, to stick our necks out and change our lives for the sake of the kingdom: brave wisdom, wisdom in practice.

On the 17th Sunday in Ordinary Time we are still in Matthew 13. Here Jesus vividly pictures how it happens that sometimes we actually find the kingdom. There are three parables, each very brief: the treasure, the pearl, the good and bad fish.

Sometimes we simply stumble on the kingdom, even when we are not looking for it:

> The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. (Matthew 13.44)

We are simply minding our own business, doing our daily work, and suddenly there it is: what we have (not) been looking for our whole lives. We trip over our future ministry, we see that we actually can do something to help the sick, defend the excluded, wipe away the tears of despair, teach and illumine safe paths amid the

circling gloom (as Cardinal Newman put it). Perhaps this is what happened to Saul on the road to Damascus, when suddenly Jesus was there, knocking him off his feet, changing his life: Paul changing the world.

Sometimes we have to go looking for the kingdom, with a discerning eye:

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great price, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

(13.45-46)

Like other merchants, this person of worldly experience goes about in the jewelers' markets, looking for the best of pearls to buy and sell. But suddenly one day she find it: the one pearl that is worth more than every other pearl, right there, in plain view. Her joy is deep and sure. This reminds me of the stories of seekers who slowly but very bravely found their way to their true vocation. Read Thomas Merton's *Seven Storey Mountain*, or Dorothy Day's *The Long Loneliness*: autobiographies in which all kinds of things happen along the way, most of them not so very memorable, until slowly, surely, they found where God was to be in their lives. Then they dropped all else, he to become a monk, she to become a Catholic and lifelong sister to the poorest among us: two prophets of the kingdom of heaven among us.

Either way, though, finding the treasure or the pearl is only the first part of the quest. The finders of the treasure and of the pearl, overwhelmed with joy, *then* have to indulge in a holy recklessness, selling everything just to hold onto what they really really want. We may find the treasure, the kingdom of heaven — but then we have to make it our own by the choices we make. We may opt to settle for something less, lazier, safer. It would be as if Mahatma Gandhi, when he was thrown off a train in South Africa because he was "colored," thought about devoting himself to solidarity with the oppressed — but then thought twice, and merely got rich as a lawyer. But he did not back away. Or as if Mother Teresa, on her train ride, realized that God was calling her to leave the convent school, to go out and help the poorest of the poor, but then slept on it and just went back to grading papers. But she dared to go out into the streets. Or as if Representative John Lewis (who died the other day) saw the Edmund Pettus bridge in Birmingham on that Sunday in 1965 and knew very well that the promised land was on the other side of it — but decided instead to watch Sunday afternoon football. But he led the way, crossing the bridge, at great personal risk. When you find the kingdom, you have to sell off your other cares and attachments, and risk everything for what your heart tells you is right. (For another inspiring story, see this short clip at the BBC website, about a Catholic nun, Sister Denise Bergon, who risked everything to save 83 French Jewish children from the Nazis during WW II.)

But sometimes there is yet another way, as Jesus' third parable tells us. Here, rather more boringly, we just have to pay closer attention to the life we are already living, to the work we are already doing at home, school, the office. We just have to take a long and hard look at what is familiar — too familiar perhaps — and sort out our experiences, hold onto what is really life-giving, and dumping overboard what is spoiled, out of date, stale:

> Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. (13.47-48)

This wisdom, the winnowing of daily life, works in all those times we don't have mystical experiences, when we aren't dazzled by treasurers and pearls but just have a deep feeling of discontent with the present moment — and do something about it. It is as if to realize: the job I'm in is no longer the job for me; what thrilled me years ago no longer keeps me alert and alive; I've been doing too much, I need to refocus my life. Here is the place for quiet dramas, that in the long run make a difference. Think about it: how many courageous government workers finally have the courage not just to notice corruption, but actually to speak out as whistle blowers? How many politicians finally decide to resist corruption and speak the truth, even if they weaken their reelection chances? How many go-with-the-flow clerics finally speak up to demand that the Church repent and change, becoming more of the kingdom of heaven? Very few, I fear; we see what we can and ought to do if we are companions of Jesus and heralds of the kingdom of heaven, but then we back away, play it safe, leaving the treasure and the pearls for others to find.

The necessary wisdom in all three parables comes together at the end of today's Gospel:

> "Have you understood all this?" He asked. They answered, "Yes."
>
> So he told them, "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old." (13.51-2)

The old and the new, the new and the old. We can't cling to old ways, since the world is changing faster and faster, right before our eyes. But we would be fools to

imagine we can start entirely afresh, as if I can really reinvent myself mid-life or in old age, or even at 25 or 30. It is only as the people we are — blessed and burdened with experience, but still alive and able to change - that we get to be witnesses to the kingdom, finally figuring out *what we need to do now*.

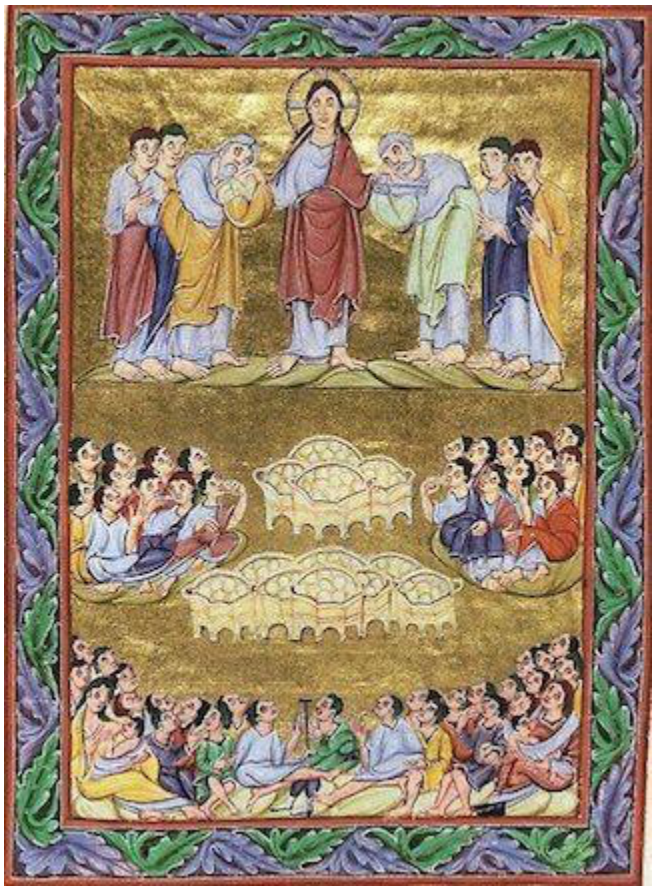
We might do well, in the end to make our own the prayer of Solomon, heard in today's first reading:

At Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and God said, "Ask what I should give you." Solomon replied, "You always showed great and steadfast love to your servant my father David, because he walked before you in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart toward you. You kept for him a great and steadfast love, and now you have given him a son — me — to sit on his throne.

O Lord my God, now you have made this servant king in place of my father David, although I am like a little child! What do I know? I don't even know how to go out or come in! But I am your servant in the midst of this people whom you have chosen, a great people, so numerous they cannot be counted. So please give your servant an understanding mind and wise heart, so I can lead your people, able to discern between good and evil, ready to protect them all. Help me to make your kingdom come to life upon this earth. (I Kings 3.5-9, adapted)

Compassion Is Possible — If We Too Have Grieved

July 31, 2020



It might be enough for us simply to read and meditate on the core of the Gospel for this 18th Sunday in Ordinary Time, August 2, a beautiful passage which Matthew (like Luke) largely takes over from Mark 6:

> When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, “This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.” Jesus said to them, “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.” They replied, “We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.” And he said, “Bring them here to me.” Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. All ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. Those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.* (Matthew 14.14-21)

Jesus sees that they are hungry, and breaks through the pragmatism of his disciples — it can’t be done! In his compassion for the crowds he insists, “It can be done. Let us feed them all!”

In our broken world, there are SO many people in need, and SO many growing and alarming problems, that the simple insistence of Jesus — my people shall not go away hungry — is a consolation for us. It is a push too, that we do what we can without limiting ourselves to what we hold in our hands.

But doesn't compassion run out? We talk today about compassion fatigue, our inability to keep empathizing with the ever increasing number of people in trouble: one more woe, one more disaster — what is this to me? If you are like me, you may have been tempted to stop reading the newspapers, checking websites, when BAD news seems to be only news. And you ask yourself, what have I done these past months for those most in need? I am safe and well; but what have I done?

So there is a basic question: how did Jesus become the person he was, always attentive and always simple enough to help people in need? Yes, we may quickly say, he is God come down on earth, and possessed of God's limitless love. But in the context of Matthew 14 it becomes clear that it is more to the point to see that Jesus is one who, having suffered himself, cannot step away from his sisters and brothers who suffer.

The context in Matthew 14 gives two clues. First, Jesus has just faced a personal loss. The first part of Matthew 14 recounts how, to avoid losing face before his dinner guests, Herod murders John the Baptist, who had been imprisoned simply for telling the truth about scandals in the palace. Jesus loses a friend and an ally, the man who opened the path for his own work. If we are to believe Luke, Jesus and John are cousins. Personal loss, and perhaps too the chill of premonition: Jesus can see that what happened to John can happen to himself.

Second, we are told:

> Now when Jesus heard this news, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. (14.13)

Jesus faced up to his loss. He did not conceal his own grief at the death of John by a busier than ever schedule, or merely by denouncing the murderous king. He simply went off by himself to face the reality of failure and death, alone with himself and with God, meditating on the death of his dear friend.

Yet, he is not alone for long:

> When the crowds heard that Jesus was there, they followed him on foot from the towns. When Jesus went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. (14.13-14)

Though he wanted to be alone, he turned his grief and aloneness/loneliness into a source of healing for others. He knew what it meant to suffer a loss, to grieve, to lament the loss of a loved one, and this enabled him to not be afraid to enter upon the sufferings of others.

Like Jesus, we need to unclutter our lives, face up to our griefs, and thus create spaces within ourselves for grief to be felt, and thus for compassion to arise. We too need to seek out a desert place — literally, or by taking some quiet time even right at home — when we can face us to the suffering within us and around us. We need to admit that we suffer, we need to face up to our fears and suffering in the silence of self and God. Then, out of that quiet and honest place of grieving, like Jesus we can go forth, in compassion sharing the little we have to help meet the great needs of our sisters and brothers.

Jesus heals their sick, because they ask. But he also turns to the matter of their hunger, their need for food before their long walk back home, even when they are ashamed to ask for food.

We might think that Jesus could just have fed them on his own, manna falling from heaven. But he does not. He asks his disciples what they have; they must contribute the little they have, a few loaves and fishes that could not possibly feed even twenty people, much less thousands. They balked; perhaps they thought it absurd to try to feed the hungry thousads; perhaps they were just thinking of their own supper; perhaps they had run down on compassion for strangers. We too have reasons for holding back in the face of the needs of others. We too have only “five loaves and two fish.” But it is with those small gifts that God chooses to work. The little bread we have is never enough, but without it God does not feed the world.

But to let go of our loaves and fishes, to share them with the hungry, we need to feel pangs of compassion. We need to be a bit hungry ourselves. The logic of the whole passage then is that if we attend to our own losses and griefs and do not

run away from our pains and losses, we will be able to notice more directly, from the heart, the suffering of people crossing our paths. If we have been hungry or sick or outcast, and have become honest about our losses, then we are likely to more like Jesus, compassionate, possessed of hearts that are open: suffering with those who suffer, because we have suffered; healing the sick, because we have been sick; feeding the hungry, because we know what it means to be hungry.

See if you can find a copy of Dorothy Day's autobiography, *The Long Loneliness*. These words appear on the last page:

"We were just sitting there talking when lines of people began to form, saying, "We need bread." We could not say, "Go, be thou filled." If there were six small loaves and a few fishes, we had to divide them. There was always bread… We cannot love God unless we love each other, and to love we must know each other. We know him in the breaking of bread, and we are not alone any more. Heaven is a banquet and life is a banquet, too, even with a crust, where there is companionship. We have all known the long loneliness and we have learned that the only solution is love and that love comes with community."

Day's life's journey was at times very hard, and lonely; and so she opened the doors of every Catholic Worker House, that no one would be homeless, no one entirely alone, no one hungry. (The founding of the Catholic Worker is described in a small book she fittingly entitles, *Loaves and Fishes*.) Every day of her long life, she tried to be like the Jesus we meet in Matthew 14, compassion arising from her own weakness and needs. So let us try to make our own the woes of the world: every woe and every loss and hunger on earth is mine too. Enough for one Sunday! But Matthew 14 is not over, and there is still more to be said. After the meal, Jesus again seeks to be alone:

> Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone.

But new troubles arise:

> But by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them... (14.22-24)

Thus begins next Sunday's Gospel. Take a peek and ask yourself, Why does the scene on the lake follow today's scene of healing and feeding?

***** *Afterword*: We say, "Jesus fed the 5,000," but we need to break this bad habit. Even the reading admits, "Those who ate were about five thousand men, *besides women and children*." Should we not then at least double the numbers, assuming that then as now, more women showed up than men? Can we not finally, in the 21st century, actually count the women too, and the many children playing around the edges of the crowd? We need to become accustomed to count differently: the miracle of Jesus feeding the "8,000" or the "10,000."

(21st in a series of homilies during the parish closures.)

When God Suddenly Appears

August 7, 2020

I began writing this homily for the 19th Sunday in Ordinary Time (August 9) on August 6, which is notable in different ways. First, it is the 75th anniversary of the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, Japan. Though that bomb, and the one on Nagasaki a few days later, brought an end to the war (even if it was near its end without the bombs), it killed between 90,000 and 146,000 people in Hiroshima, many immediately, but many more due to radiation poisoning the days and years to follow.

As for deadly explosions: Let us not forget the terrible explosion in Beirut on August 4 — due not to an act of war, it seems, but to criminal negligence in story explosives in the city – killing over well over 100, wounding 5000 or more, and leaving 100,000 homeless. A sudden blast on an ordinary day.

Second, as I write on August 6, it is also the feast of the Transfiguration. This too is an eruption of sorts, when Christ suddenly revealed the blinding light of his inner divinity to his unsuspecting apostles:

> Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. (Matthew 17.1-2)

Suddenly, for a moment, the three disciples saw Jesus in a very different way, divinity unconcealed. Life quickly returned to normal, as they descended the mountain, but this moment stayed with them, perhaps intensifying their commitment to discipleship.

But now we can turn to today's Gospel. The scene is from Matthew 14. It follows upon the feeding of the ten thousand (women and children counted!) we heard last week:

> Immediately (after the feeding of the ten thousand) Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray.
>
> When evening came, he was there alone, but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, “It is a ghost!” And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”… (Matthew 14.22-32)

In other words, another theophany: not with explosive force or blinding light, but God intervening once again. The apostles had just seen, but perhaps had not understood, the fantastic act of feeding so many people with just a few loaves and fishes. But now Jesus walks on water and, to make things 100% clear, speaks the words God spoke to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3): "It is I" (*ego eimi* in the Greek). Yet the purpose is a gentle one: Jesus comes to them suddenly in the night, for protection and peace.

In Mark 6, the scene ends with a kind of rebuke of the apostles who cannot see what is before their very eyes:

> And the apostles were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened. (Mark 6.51b-52)

Matthew softens the scene by a different ending:

> When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.” (14.32b-33)

Try to hold before your mind's eye all these scenes: the obliteration of Hiroshima, the shattering of Beirut; Jesus shining forth a blinding light on Mount Tabor; Jesus impossibly feeding the hungry; Jesus, God revealed, walking across the waters. Neither nature nor tradition nor teachings nor virtues are enough: when God finally

appears, nature is transformed for a moment, God is seen and heard in a very very clear manner. The manifestation of God is terrifying, shocking, but in the end life-giving, God-with-us.

Now we could end here, inspired perhaps to pray for openness to God's unexpected revelations, perhaps wishing too: "May God appear here and now, when more than ever we need God!"

But there's a catch. Sometimes as least the God who suddenly appears expects more from us. I skipped over a little section of Matthew's account, a scene missing from the other Gospels. This is what happens when Jesus approaches but before he gets into the boat:

> Peter said, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." Jesus replied, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" (14.28-31)

Peter both doubts — "if it is you…" — but unlike the other apostles, he puts his life on the line, a mere human imitating Jesus so literally, seemingly too literally. He too walks on the water – until he can't and starts to sink. The point seems to be: when God appears unexpectedly and unnaturally, then walk toward that manifest God – on land when violence is rife and food scarce, on water when a storm is raging. If you keep your eyes on Christ, Matthew is telling us, you can do the impossible. But once Peter shifts his eyes and starts worrying about the wind and waves, his focus is lost, and he

can no longer do the impossible. He needs to be saved from drowning — and Jesus' gentle, strong, real human hand is right there, to pull Peter out of the water.

For us, the real challenge is not simply to lament the violent intrusion of the destructive, nor to think fondly of the presence of God, but to realize we can do more than is possible on our own: if Christ is really present, even just once in a while, then we too can take our bits of fish and bread and feed thousands; we can stop cowering in our boats and walk impossibly across the waters, facing up to the storms swirling around us.

> Note: I can't help adding a side-note here. In foolishly venturing to walk on the water – as a crazy holy person might – Peter is exemplifying what Cardinal Emmanuel Suhard (1874-1949) of Paris meant when he defined witnessing to Christ (being a saint) in this way: "To be a witness does not consist in engaging in propaganda or even in stirring people up, but in being a living mystery; it means to live in such a way that one's life would not make sense if God did not exist." (This passage was a favorite of Dorothy Day's. The Cardinal's other famous insight is also worth hearing: "One of the priest's first services to the world is to tell the truth.")

But perhaps walking on water is not for you (or me) right now. If you want to meditate on a still simpler but very powerful appearing of God, go to this week's first reading from I Kings 19. It is an understatement to say that the chapter has a complicated context. Elijah has just killed 400 pagan priests, and now the wicked Queen Jezebel, wife of the wicked king Ahab, is hunting for Elijah, to slaughter him in turn. He flees, is cared for by God (who sends an angel with freshly baked bread and pure water), and ends up at Mount Horeb (probably Mount Sinai, where Moses met God). He does not know what to do next, but God is manifest to him in the extraordinarily ordinary way:

> God said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. (I Kings 19.11-13)

No wind, no fire, no earthquakes, and no blinding lights, no heavenly voices even. Just a very faint sound, what is here translated as "a sound of sheer silence." Then Elijah speaks with God, and knows what to do, where to go next.

All the stereotypes about God's appearing are here put aside, in order to hear God in the simplest of sounds, the whisper of a whisper. For this, we needn't try to walk on the water; we just need to be very, very quiet and wait. (Though perhaps being very quiet and waiting is harder than walking on water?)

Even simpler: if you like the theme of the divine simplicity, be sure to listen to the "Simple Song" that comes at the start of Leonard Bernstein's *Mass* (which opened the Kennedy Center in Washington DC in 1971). The heart of the song: "God is the simplest song of all." You can find a number of versions on the web, but try this version, Victor Starsky singing, or this one by the glorious opera singer, Renée Fleming.

Crumbs for a Canaanite Woman

August 14, 2020

Among our many woes and challenges today is overcoming deep-engrained prejudices, by which we include some in our community of friends and neighbors, and treat others as alien, dangerous, immoral, irreligious. We need to make distinctions, of course, and we all have family, friends, and neighborhoods small and large, but distinctions can become walls, and we can end up dehumanizing other people, keeping them out of our lives as much as possible.

I mention this, since for this 20th Sunday in Ordinary Time (August 16) our Gospel reading takes us to Matthew 15 (based on Mark 7, with changes) – and to one of the most difficult readings in all of the Gospels:

> "Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.” But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, “Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.” He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.” He answered, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” Then Jesus answered her, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed instantly." (Matthew 15.21-28)

Ignore her, send her away, insult her; praise her faith, cure her daughter. What do we make of this unflattering reading with a happy ending? Let’s take it step by step.

First, we can summarize the story as similar to other Gospel encounters: a woman comes to Jesus for help, for her daughter who is possessed by a demon; impressed by the great faith of the woman, Jesus drives out the demon.

Second, however, complications arise immediately. The woman is not a Jew, but a pagan, a Canaanite. This is the only use of “Canaanite” in the New Testament (it's a Syro-Phoenician woman for Mark), so Matthew is making things more difficult on purpose. Canaanites do not share the faith, and right back to Exodus at least, there is enormous tension between the Canaanites and the Jews who claim the land as God’s gift to them. This tough encounter is one step beyond the beautiful

story in John 4 where Jesus meets, enters dialogue with a Samaritan woman, and gradually brings her back to life and new faith. Samaritans in their own way share the faith of Abraham and Sarah, from the beginning. Canaanites are alien and unwelcome in a more intense way: they are entirely unlike us.

Third, this unnamed pagan woman turns out to be an exemplar of faith. Though Jesus is passing through or near non-Jewish ("pagan") territory, she has a primal instinct for him. She immediately seeks him out, as if she has known him all her life. She recognizes that he is a special and powerful person. She bows low before him in deep humility. She worships him — as did those good pagans, the Magi in Matthew 2. And three times, she addresses him by one of the great titles of faith: Lord, *Kyrios*, (a word that we pray each Mass when we say, "Lord have mercy" [the old *Kyrie Eleison*]). She even calls him, "Lord, Son of David," signaling the faith of Israel, though she is not a Jew. Finally, she does not give up, since she knows that Jesus is the One, the one who can save her daughter. She keeps asking, until she is heard. Had she been a Jew or a Christian, she would easily have been a role model for all.

Fourth, a tension basic to the early Church surfaces here: Isn't Jesus, the Messiah, son of David, for the Jews, God's beloved chosen people, but for anyone else? Jesus says as much: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." The disciples have no time for her, and are typically abrupt and rather heartless: "Send her away – she is making too much noise, crying out on behalf of her daughter." (Remember how in Matthew 14 they wanted to send away the people without feeding them.) This may reflect a tension in the early Church: we followers of Jesus are Jews, Christ is for us. We are busy enough without worrying about outsiders like you.

Fifth, at first Jesus, though quieter, acts like his disciples. Apparently he does not look at her, and he remains silent when she begs his help: "He did not answer her at all." Suppose this was the end of it? A pagan lady asks for help, not for herself, but for her child; Jesus does not listen to her; they push her out the door; the demons continue to plague her daughter. How sad a story it would be.

Sixth, it is the hard and difficult exchange at the heart of the passage, one of the most difficult of all Jesus' encounters in the Gospels, that saves the day. Jesus finally does address her, but in words that shock us:

> "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

This is the second time in Matthew that Jesus warns against wasting resources on dogs:

> "Do not give what is holy to dogs; and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under foot and turn and bite you." (Matthew 7.6)

Some interpreters have seen these words as a bit of ancient repartee or even humor, as if Jesus was bantering with the woman. But we are not told of a smile

on his face or a twinkle in his eye, and she is a desperate woman, beside herself in worry over her daughter, and in no mood for joking around. So we need to take the words at face value, as if to say: Why should I waste my healing powers on a Canaanite woman and her daughter? The bread from heaven is for the children alone, not the dogs under the table.

Canaanites are aliens and excluded, but how about Canaanite *women*? How much does gender matter? Unfortunately, more than we might wish, since the fact that she is a woman seems to accentuate the tension. Jesus has already encountered pagans twice in this Gospel. The Magi in Matthew 2 were exemplary pagans, but male. The centurion in Matthew 8 is a pagan, but male. Jesus is readily impressed by his faith and cures his servant right away. Is it because he is a Roman, or because he is male? Is this scene different because she is a woman? Jesus is usually very attuned to the women in his life — Mary and Martha, the Samaritan woman, the woman caught in adultery, the woman who anoints his feet, and of course Mary Magdalene. So why does he treat this Canaanite woman so harshly at first? Think about it.

Seventh, the tension finally breaks and the logjam of prejudice swept away, when the woman responds acutely:

"Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."

O Lord, Son of David, even on your own premise that Jews are God's children and Canaanites are like dogs, we should still be able to get the crumbs. Give me just a little of your healing power, a crumb that will drive out the demon. Isn't even a crumb of your power like that mustard seed you praised in Matthew 13, that tiny bit of grace that can move mountains?

Jesus now wakes up. He sees the faith that had been evident all along, and he had so rarely found in the years of his ministry:

> "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish!"

It is as if the centuries of prejudice and alienation crumble, as her words make Jesus see that he loses nothing, Israel loses nothing, if they share the wealth of God's grace with every person of faith. God's love is not something that runs out. This unnamed woman comes to Jesus; she calls him Lord; she bows down and worships him; she does not give up. How then could Jesus *not* see her as a person

of faith? It is for her too that he has come: God's children get hungry in Canaan too.

So what do we learn from all this? It is an unpleasant scene, but like Mark, Matthew preserves the story rather than dropping it, because it has much to teach us. On one level, this passage is simply a timely reminder to us that we can be (and probably are) prejudiced, likely to build walls, and in a miserly fashion save our gifts for people like us. We stereotype, and we then exclude the outsider, the person in need, the pagan. We may be tempted to see nothing and say nothing when the unwelcome stranger shows up in front of us, begging our help. But the gifts of God are for all, not ours to keep under lock and key: what we have freely received, we must freely share.

On a second level, we seem to be learning here that Jesus himself had to learn, outgrow his own prejudices and his prior understanding of his mission. This is the easiest way to understand the text. Jesus is the Son of God, but that does not mean that he could not ever make a mistake, could not learn, could not correct his own behavior. As his harsh words lead to her humble yet biting reply, Jesus changes his attitude and learns something new, and frees up his divine power in a still more inclusive (God-like) way. If Jesus can learn and then speak and act differently, can we not do the same? Want to be perfect as God is perfect (Matthew 5.48)? Then let us be willing to change our minds and widen our hearts.

The Keys of the Kingdom, for an Imperfect Peter

August 21, 2020

"Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." (17.19)

This Sunday (August 23) is the 21st Sunday in Ordinary Time. Our Gospel is a rather famous passage from Matthew 16. Simon – soon to be Peter – makes a famous confession on faith – "You are the Messiah,the Son of the living God" — to which Jesus responds by awarding Peter the keys of the kingdom and establishing him as the Rock (*petros*) on which the Church is to be built. For Roman Catholics, this has traditionally been a key passage in the establishment of the papacy, beginning with Peter and passed down for millennia. But at least from the Reformation on, many scholars and reformers have insisted that Matthew 16 by no means establishes anything remotely like the Roman Catholic Church. Read about all this here, for instance.

But we are not papal historians. So what does the passage tell us, that might help us on this Sunday in August 2020? Let us try to sort it out. The Gospel comes in three scenes, all highlighting Peter: faith, authority, and (actually for next Sunday) denial. We can take them up one by one. Two of three follow exactly the account in Mark 8. The first is Jesus' question, and the answer by Simon/Peter:

> "Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?' And they said, 'Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.'" (Matthew 16.13-16)

Peter answers the hard question with insight and conviction. (We may naturally think here too of the climactic scene in John 6, where too Peter takes the lead: "So Jesus asked the twelve, 'Do you also wish to go away?' Simon Peter answered

him, ‘Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.’” [John 6.67-69])

But if the first scene in Matthew 16 makes Peter look good, the immediate sequel in Mark, which Matthew makes his third scene (as we skip for a moment the in-between part), is quite the opposite:

> "From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.
>
> But Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.” But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." (21-23)

The faithful Peter = the *satan* who tempts Jesus; same man, different moment, the best now falls short. Jesus himself is perhaps struggling toward a realization that he must die in Jerusalem, but Peter is wishing for a happy ending and tempting Jesus to go for what is easier. This Jesus cannot tolerate.

It is crucial, I think, that we have both the first scene and this scene: the good and the clueless, the leader and the one who botches things. It is not surprising that Peter would be shocked by Jesus’ dire prediction, After all, we find it relatively easy at least to think of a suffering Messiah, since we have been hearing this for 2000 years of so.

But in any case, this is the kind of guy Peter is. Think of the Gospel we heard two weeks ago, where Peter is the one who starts to drown, but only because he is the one who dared to take impossible steps in faith. And this same Peter is the (only) one who dares to follow Jesus when he was arrested, right into the courtyard of the high priest. Great bravery and loyalty, but then he denies Jesus three times:

> "Those who had arrested Jesus took him to Caiaphas the high priest, in whose house the scribes and the elders had gathered. But Peter was following him at a distance, as far as the courtyard of the high priest; and going inside, he sat with the guards in order to see how this would end... After a little while the bystanders came up and said to Peter, 'Certainly you are also one of them, for your accent betrays you.' Then he began to curse, and he swore an oath, 'I do not know the man!' At that moment the cock crowed. Then Peter remembered what Jesus had said: 'Before the cock crows, you will deny me three times.' And he went out and wept bitterly. (26.57-58, 73-75)

The others hid themselves. Peter takes a risk, betrays his lord, weeps bitterly, but even then seems not to run away: he has the better part, does he not, to have loved, fallen, and repented? (Think of Alfred Lord Tennyson's memorial poem for his friend Arthur Hallam: "Better to have loved and lost, than never to have loved at all.")

Finally, we have the intervening scene not found in Mark but inserted by Matthew between the two we have just considered. This is the one I cited at the start, the one that became intimately linked to debates over the identity and lineage of Church leadership. Again here is the text:

> "And Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.'" (17.19)

Were Matthew simply promoting Peter's cause — long live the Pope! — he might have stopped with this scene and omitted the "Get behind me, Satan!" scene. But Matthew, like Mark, wants us to see the imperfections as well as the virtues of Peter. The keys of the kingdom — given to a man who sorely disappoints Jesus moments later.

The meaning of the drama, for any disciple and for the Church as a whole, lies in the three scenes together: the profession of faith; the receiving of a new name and receiving of the keys of the kingdom; and

Peter’s embarrassing lapse.

Matthew surely did not envision the Roman Church as it came to be in the centuries to come, and hopefully had no expectations or delusions about perfect Church leaders. Insofar as Peter serves as a model for any woman or man who is a leader in the Church, it is the mix we find in Matthew 16 that hits the mark: insight into who Jesus is, and utter loyalty to him; plus, manifest, obvious limitations, failures to trust entirely in God, the temptation to improve on God’s model of suffering leadership; plus, the work of actually being a servant-leader, holding the keys that can open (and yes, close) the doors of the kingdom.

We are very mindful today of the sins of the Church and the sins of her leaders as well as us members. The Church has to become better, do more good and less harm. For this, we don’t need leaders who are perfect or pretend to be so. We don’t need leaders who merely lock doors and keep the keys to themselves, who try to lock people out — or lock us in. We are better off with honestly, openly imperfect people, who fall and get up again.

And let us too try to be more like Peter, ready to speak the truth of who Jesus is (even if we also make him fit our stereotype of savior), walk on the waters (even if we sink soon enough), and stay with Jesus in his times of trial (even if we also deny him more than once) — and by humiliation and humility learn better to be the kind of Catholics who in our faith and loving service show how imperfect people can be real disciples of Christ, women and men of faith, of service, ready to get up again every time we fall. But it's not easy. Indeed, the chapter is not over, and Matthew will have a little more to say — next Sunday.

The Cost of Discipleship

August 28, 2020

The Gospel for the 22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time follows directly on last Sunday's Gospel, continuing our reflection on *Matthew* 16. Indeed, last week I anticipated this week's reading, by including all three "Peter scenes:" his witness to faith, his receipt of the keys of the kingdom, and his failure to appreciate the nature of Jesus' identity and destiny, as one who must suffer and die, before rising in triumph. The third scene starts off today's Gospel:

> "From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, 'God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.' But he turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.'" (Matthew 16.21-23)

Jesus sees his mission clearly and starkly, and does not protect himself from what is coming. Peter tries to separate mission from cross, death from resurrection; he is, for a moment, a *satan*, a tempter. As we saw last week, it is easy for us to do better than Peter and resist tempting Jesus to an easier path — but that's mainly because we've had 2000 years of hindsight, knowing the end of the story: of course he dies, of course he rises. We too often enough want discipleship-lite, the happy ending without the troubles before it.

But today the Gospel climaxes in the application of the three "Peter scenes" to the lives of those listening. Jesus turns to his disciples and makes this clear:

> "If any of you want to become my followers, deny yourselves and take up your cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit you if you gain the whole world but forfeit your life? What will you give in return for your life?" (16.24-26)

When it comes to discipleship, there can be no mere spectators. All who would follow Jesus become part of the drama of Jesus, taking up our own crosses.

But we cannot but notice that Jesus' next words quickly suggest that the sacrifice is worth it: as you give, so you will receive:

> "For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done." (16.27)

If you do take up your cross, your reward surely will be great. Don't worry about the cross and denial of self. You will receive far more than you have given, death will surely be followed by resurrection. This is not quite Peter's refusal of the very idea of suffering and death, but still, the comfort of a happier ending.

This might be the end of it, except for the fact of the daunting first reading chosen to accompany the Gospel: a terrible, compelling passage from the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah was famously called from the very beginning:

> "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations." (Jeremiah 1.5)

From the very beginning Jeremiah is given a mission to speak on God's behalf.

But his mission entails great suffering. He is put in the stocks in a public place like a common thief, to be mocked by passers-by. Shamed and in pain, he cannot be silent, and he cries out at his powerlessness, directly confronting God in fierce words:

> "O Lord, you have enticed me, and I was enticed; you have overpowered me, and you have prevailed. I have become a laughingstock all day long; everyone mocks me. For whenever I speak, I must cry out, I must shout, 'Violence and destruction!' For the word of the Lord has become for me a reproach and derision all day long. If I say, 'I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name,' then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot. "(20.7-9)

Just these three verses make up today's first reading, but Jeremiah's utterance goes on. The second part depicts Jeremiah's associates all turning against him:

> "For I hear many whispering: 'Terror is all around! Denounce him! Let us denounce him!' Those close to me are waiting for me to stumble. 'Perhaps he can be enticed, and we can prevail against him, and take our revenge on him.'" (20.10)

Betrayal on all sides; friends disappear when the word of God is inconvenient. Jeremiah 20 is read on this 22nd Sunday, it would seem, because it casts a shadow on Jesus' pronouncement on his own coming suffering, death and resurrection, and his invitation to his followers to take up their own crosses.

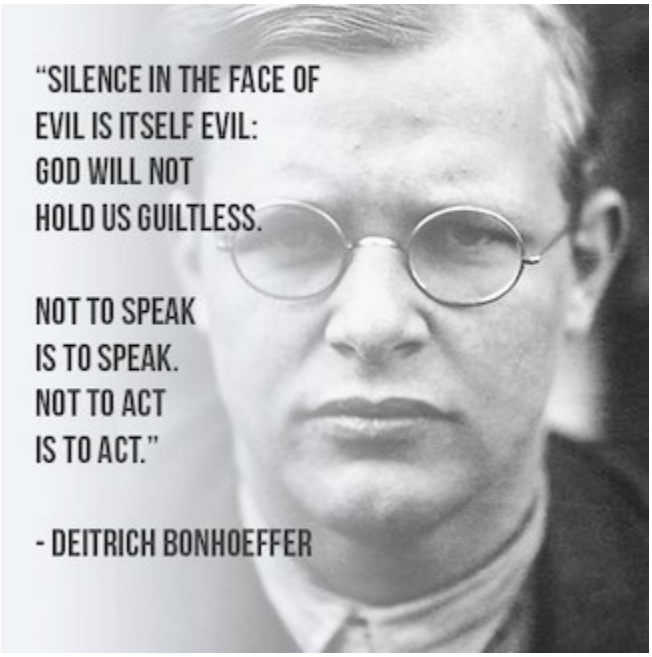
Mission is not easy. The happy end does not take away the pain and fear; being God's favored one, chosen vehicle, is not necessarily a happy event. Jeremiah's gut instinct for God does not erase the pain of seduction and abandonment. Woe

to the person who *is* faithful to her mission! Really, it does get that bad: just look a few verses down in the same chapter, to the start of Jeremiah's next lament:

> "Cursed be the day on which I was born. The day when my mother bore me, let it not be blessed." (20.14)

If this turn — Matthew 16 read in the shadow of Jeremiah 20 — seems rather depressing, so it is, because the journey to life passes through death, real death, not a show or a moment of small drama.

A hard and famous example: One of the greatest books of Christian witness in the 20th century was *The Cost of Discipleship*, written by the Lutheran pastor and theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was born in Breslau, Germany, in 1906. A Distinguished pastor and teacher, Bonhoeffer could have had an entirely comfortable life. But he knew better. His little book again and again emphasizes how hard it is to really follow Christ, because taking up the cross is hard.



He reminds us that the world desperately needs honest followers of Christ who speak truth to power, risk their necks to help those in trouble, refuse to play it safe when fundamental human values have been scorned and pushed aside, when hatred seeks to stifle love. Being like Jesus is to see the world not just for its undeniable goodness and beauty, but also in its grim darkness, violence, selfishness. The cost of discipleship is great, Bonhoeffer tells us, a long night before dawn. Be afraid, but still take up your cross here and now, and do as Jesus did.

Bonhoeffer was not just an eloquent writer and teacher. He practiced love to the extreme, carrying his cross into the heart of darkness. That is: an early and outspoken critic of Hitler and the Nazis, he worked in public and in secret against the Third Reich, and he was often in trouble with the Nazis. His travels brought him to New York in 1939 and to Union Theological Seminary, where he could have stayed for the duration. safe and honored. But he saw that as a Christian, he needed to face the evil close up and do something about it. So he returned to Germany when the war was heating up and others were fleeing. He became involved in more and more risky plots again Hitler. After being captured and suffering in several concentration camps, on April 9, 1945 Bonhoeffer was executed by hanging — just two weeks before American soldiers arrived and liberated the captives.

He is one of the finest and bravest disciples of Christ of the 20th century, and will always be remembered for his faith and courage: but his path to glory was through the camps, finally to stand naked at the gallows. His was a stark realism about the cost of discipleship — in keeping with what Jesus knew from the start, and in keeping with what Jeremiah had centuries earlier put into eloquent words. A terrible end, but for Bonhoeffer as for Jeremiah and Jesus, an infinite beauty arises from the horror.

In this grim year of 2020, we are faced with a Covid 19 that kills without pity, amid stark manifestations of a hateful racism, in a world of floods and fire and environmental degradation. Surely we don't need more bad news in the guise of the Gospel's Good News! But still, in 2020 we have to be realistic Christians, our eyes open, lest we be worse than the faltering Peter, Christians in name only.

Jesus calls us to stand in the middle of things, putting our lives on the line, even when it hurts, in small ways and mortally. We need to live our faith, to do our best, no longer guilty bystanders, outraged but taking no risks. Being honestly, vulnerably present can be manifest in a deep compassion, but also, for some of us at least, by the risk-taking of women and men who refuse to be silent in the face of the violence and injustice around us, who expose themselves before raw and ruthless power, and suffer the consequences, all out of love. So who among us might be the Bonhoeffers of 2020?

But lest we part in too gloomy a way, I leave the last words to Jeremiah. At the end of the lament I recounted above, even in his misery he also cries out in faith:

> "But the Lord is with me like a dread warrior. Therefore my persecutors will stumble, and they will not prevail. They will be greatly shamed, for they will not succeed. Their eternal dishonor will never be forgotten.
>
> "O Lord of hosts, you test the righteous, you see the heart and the mind. Let me see your retribution upon them, for to you I have committed my cause.
>
> "Sing to the Lord; praise the Lord! For he has delivered the life of the needy from the hands of evildoers." (20.11-13)

To Confront, Repent, Forgive: Christian Community in an Unforgiving Society

September 4, 2020

Among the many problems facing Americans today one is often overlooked: we seem to have forgotten how to forgive one another, how to be reconciled in a way that neither overlooks and gives wrongdoers a free pass for their real and inexcusable wrongs, nor establishes impassable walls between the sinner and the sinned against. People easily apologize, though often enough apologies can seem to be mere words, regrets that have no cost. Or forgiveness can seem a matter of personal piety — "God wants me to forgive you" — and ineffective, given that wrongdoers — mass murderers, perpetrators of racial violence, rapists, the obscenely and irresponsibly wealthy, men who abuse their wives and children — need to be stopped, and merit punishment. In the Church, there are too many stories we've all heard about people going to confession and committing the same sins again and again – even predatory priests continuing to prey after every confession. So why forgive? But if there are no rites of forgiveness, we seem likely to fall into greater and greater anger, hardened and unrelenting, lashing out at unforgivable enemies.

There is surely a need for a national conversation on this, but in the short run we Catholics need first to figure this out among ourselves, by reimagining repentance and forgiveness in a way that works for believers, overcomes anger and alienation, and makes God's forgiving grace visible in the way we nurture and live community.

It is timely then to pay special attention to the Gospel readings for the 23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time (September 6) and the 24th Sunday (September 13), from Matthew 18. This Sunday (September 6) we have Matthew 18.15-20, which showcases some rules for making the Church a community of reconciliation. Next Sunday (September 13), Matthew 18.21-35 gives us a reflection on the need to keep forgiving, even to impossible lengths, lest we fall into the disaster of self-righteousness of those who forget that they are in need of forgiveness and thus refuse to forgive others.

Both weeks' readings are preceded by Jesus' harsh denunciation of those who scandalize the young:

> "Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to the one by whom the stumbling block comes!" (18.6-7),

and by the extreme recommendation to cut off the instrument of evil-doing,

“If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life maimed or lame than to have two hands or two feet and to be thrown into the eternal fire.” (18.8)

The stakes are most serious indeed, because evil — whatever it may be — is real and dangerous and intolerable. But after this grim opening, we have Matthew’s version of the parable of the lost sheep: no one need be written off as hopeless, by God or the community (18.10-14).

Against the background of these opening insights into sin, scandal, and forgiveness, this Sunday’s Gospel suddenly shifts gears into what the community can and should do in the face of scandalous and unending harm to the community and its members. Matthew 18.15-20 shows us how to deal with someone who sins against a fellow community member, and whose behavior is so intolerable that something must be done.

First, do something yourself. Don’t merely criticize, condemn, backbite, turn a blind eye, or forget the whole thing. Rather, go directly to the offending person and confront them:

> "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that person." (18.15)

The first step is for each person to take responsible, speak up and speak out, and personally, privately confront the sinner. This is quiet but hard work, to humanize the offending person enough that you can meet them and speak calmly, trying to change things for the better. It is easier to yell and scream and denounce from a distance, than to look your brother or sister in the eye and ask them to change.

But if this person refuses to repent, try again, still without public uproar. Just bring along just one or two others, to help persuade, and to be able to vouch for what happens:

> "But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses." (18.16)

A record has now been kept, so that the offender cannot pretend that they did not know what was wrong, or hope that they can get off with some cheap words of regret that cost nothing and change nothing. Rather, “you heard what we said, we all listened to you, and now we expect you to change.”

Third, if even that does not work, then the whole community has to get involved:

> "If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the whole church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." (18.17)

At this point forgiveness has its limits: as long as you speak or act in so evil a manner, you do not belong in the community. The stubborn evildoer — whoever it is, whatever they have done, for whatever reason they refuse to repent — can no longer be part of our community: get out, do not come here for worship anymore! Come back (we can hope) when your heart has changed...

What is striking is that the passage is not about God's forgiveness or condemnation. Jesus is doubling down on the importance of the community's role: act like the companions of Jesus you claim to be. Indeed, the power that had been given to Peter in Matthew 14 is now given to the whole community. Judgment and reconciliation belong not merely to Peter, but to all the gathered disciples:

> "Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." (18.18)

No passing the buck here. We cannot make the encounter with the evildoer and the reconciliation that should follow into work that someone else is supposed to do. What we find here is a beginning for the Church's own work of forgiveness — our own work of facing up to the sinner, challenging her or his evil ways, and working for reconciliation, in which the life of the Church finds its foundations. Indeed, the whole passage reminds us of Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount:

> "When you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift." (5.23-24)

What Jesus says ideally in the Sermon — reconciliation first, rituals later! — is in Matthew 18 now worked out in real life, as the early Church began to figure out how to balance its rites and pieties with facing up to the evil of its own members in real time. Reconciliation first, rituals later: hard for any religious community to practice!

In the short run, the goal is to stop the sinner from sinning still more, to end the abuse and undercut intolerable evils — and in such a way that the end result is reconciliation, and an opening into a divine-human community. Matthew's last word, after all, is that it is this reconciled community that finds God present among us once again:

> "Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father

> in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." (18.19-20)

God on earth, God here and now, not simply by God's gracious act, but in the honest and quiet and persistent actions we take, when we face up to evil and still leave room for forgiveness.

How might this reconciliation make a difference in our harsh and unforgiving culture? We have the sacrament of reconciliation, but here we are talking about public sins, cultural evil, and the way the community, not simply individuals, face up to it. Suppose that the Catholic community began to practice more honestly and patiently the ministry of denouncing evil — public evils, public sins — but while still drawing evildoers into moments of repentance and forgiveness. Might not a community that practices confrontation and reconciliation in 2020, as Jesus did 2000 years ago, play a more effective role in a society where honesty, repentance and reconciliation are so rare?

All of this is vague, I admit: Which sins are we talking about? Which sinners?

But Matthew gives no examples, and perhaps the point is to leave it up to the community to decide which public behaviors — words and deeds, silences and omissions — are simply incompatible with the way of Christ. There will of course be disagreement; one person's tradition is another person's target for change. So try this: watch the news, read the papers, scan your websites: what are the worst sins of 2020, how are they afflicting the United States — and most importantly, how do such conflicts taint the Church? How are we going to confront the doers of evil around us and in our midst (sometimes including ourselves), so as to directly engage our sisters and brothers, confront the truth and expose evil, and yet in the end bring about reconciliation?

But there is more to be said. Matthew 18 is not over with. Next week we will hear an appeal that we should forgive 70 times 7 times, and we will contemplate the sad story of a man who cannot forgive, because he cannot realize that he has been forgiven.

(Sometimes these written homilies coincide with my giving the weekly homily during the Mass at our website. You can find the earlier spoken version here.)

To Forgive in an Unforgiving World, Reckless Like God

September 11, 2020

This Sunday, September 13, the 24th in Ordinary Time, we hear again from Matthew 18, and thus still confronted with the theme of forgiveness. Last week the reading singled out the clearest communal part of the chapter, where an early Church mechanism for engaging and confronting the sinner in the community is put before us, with a hope of reconciliation but also a tough choice to expel from the community, at least temporarily, the person who will not repent and reform. As I suggested, in our unrepentant and unforgiving society, we would do well similarly to breathe new life into old customs for reconciliation in the Church.

All of that was rather sensible and prudent, but one cannot fail to notice how heated and odd other parts of Matthew 18 are. As I also mentioned last week, near the start of the chapter is a denunciation of scandal, fierce words against those who take advantage of the innocent and young. There is a terrifying instruction on self-punishment that makes very clear the reprehensible nature of sins against the vulnerable:

> "If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life maimed or lame than to have two hands or two feet and to be thrown into the eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into the hell fires." (Matthew 18.8-9)

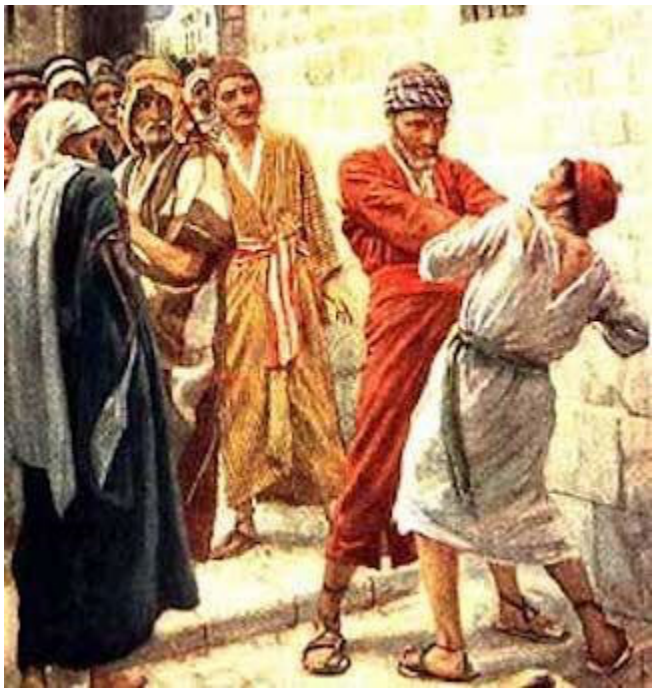
The portion of Matthew 18 we hear this week puts two further grand exaggerations before us. First, forgiving seems to be an unending process:

> "Then Peter came and said to him, 'Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?' Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times." (18.21-22)

Or, the scholars tell us, perhaps the text says, "seventy times seven times"! 77 times or 490 times, as you wish, but still rather ridiculous and offensive, in the light of the awful and unforgivable wrong-doing around us. We may balk at this: why keep forgiving people who don't deserve to be forgiven? In some case, once may see more than enough.

The parable that follows in Matthew 18 seems meant to explain Jesus' teaching on forgiveness. On the surface this new teaching on the ways of the kingdom seems straightforward:

“For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, ‘Pay what you owe.’ Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’ And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.” (18.23-35)



This exchange between a king and his slaves does make sense: if you have been forgiven a great deal, cannot you then forgive others? Here the sequence is this: because you have been forgiven much, then you should forgive. Or perhaps it is a circle: you have been forgiven, therefore you can forgive, and therefore you will be forgiven, again and again.

But the sharp edge of the parable is the size of the debt: ten thousand talents in the first case, and one hundred denarii in the second. We cannot be certain on the modern equivalent of these debts, but it is something like this:

One hundred denarii = about $11,000 in today’s money.

Ten thousand talents = about $7,000,000,000 (yes, 7 billion!) in today’s money

Matthew is making the whole thing seem absurd. It is preposterous to think that the first servant could have borrowed and owed so much, or imagine ever repaying so much. And really, could anyone be forgiven such a fantastic amount and not then be generous? But it seems that the “king” and his “slaves” are displaying how to be and not be in the kingdom of God, wherein one's experience of God dramatically changes how we relate to everyone else. Realizing that God has forgiven us infinitely cannot, I think, mean that we are 1,000,000 times or so more evil than the person who sins against us. But if we truly see our imperfect and finite selves opening up into the Reality of God, then what any person does to us can never measure up to what happens to us in experiencing God. That is, throw quantitative calculations — how many, how much? — out the window. Don’t count up acts of forgiveness, as if balancing the books. Don’t forgive now and then. Let forgiveness define who you are. You will not be a pushover, you will overthrow the ordinary way of seeing things, infinite love in the face of petty evils.

To let God love us infinitely, and to let that infinity guide our lives: such is the challenge and the possibility. This is why the one *unforgivable* sin is “against the Holy Spirit,” as we heard a few chapters earlier:

> “Therefore I tell you, people will be forgiven for every sin and blasphemy, but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. Whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.” (12.31-32)

And what does that mean? It is a mystery, but at the moment I take it to mean that in the Kingdom we need to understand that we are always standing before God: the finite before the infinite, body before spirit, imperfection before fullness, the dead before the living, momentary breath before the Spirit. There can be no counting up of what God has done for us, in us, as if to measure it against what other humans have done against us. To count up acts of forgiveness is as pointless as measuring the billions we have been given, forgiven, against the little that anyone can ever have done against us. To refuse to forgive is like catching the wind and holding it tight in your hand, like pouring the whole ocean into a small hole in the sand. The infinity of God's love and mercy is not ours to give out in small portions.

If we think about the whole of Matthew 18, we starting thinking about forgiveness in two ways:

> *Right side of the brain* (September 6): seek reconciliation, gather witnesses, bring the evil-doer before the community. Do not forgive too much, lest they take advantage of us.
>
> *Left side of the brain* (September 13): forgive with the recklessness of an infinitely loving God.

Surely we need both sides of our brain, right? Patient, measured justice, but also compassion without limits. We cannot condone wickedness, we cannot turn a blind eye on scandalous abuse. But, Jesus says, after we have done all we can do, we can do as God does, we can overthrow the way of the world by forgiving and loving as conduits of God's mercy, an ocean of love measured against pitiful drops of evil. Or as Jesus put it earlier in Matthew,

> “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.
>
> "You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous...
>
> "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” (5.38-45, 48)

Six Months Into Our Confinement: Taking Stock, Beginning Anew

September 18, 2020

It is hard to believe that more than six months have passed since Covid 19 began to shut down our ordinary lives, disrupt work and school, and bring sickness and death to so many near and far. We don't have to worry about a second wave of the pandemic, but only because the first wave never ended. Here we are, all cooped up, working at home, schooling at home, puttering about at home, yearning to be elsewhere. These past six months, we have been as it were under house arrest. It is as if Lent has gone on for a very long time, and we are being purified and remade: we are not the people we were in March 2020, nor are our town and state the same, nor will the Church come out of this unchanged.

If we have jobs and have homes, and family or friends or (for me) other Jesuits in our home, we are lucky. We may find it all very hard, but we must be mindful of the very many people who have died or gotten very sick, or lost loved ones, or lost jobs and have no money to pay for even the basics of life. We have to be mindful of those who risk their own health and safety every day, caring for the sick and keeping society afloat. But we can still find our own situations difficult, even calling into question our presuppositions about ourselves until this point in our lives.

It turns out that forced inactivity and seclusion can occasion intense personal reflection and honesty about one's life and its purpose. Confinement has for instance led to many an important book being written. In the 6th century, the philosopher Boethius wrote his *Consolation of Philosophy* while in prison awaiting a trial that would lead to his execution. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whom I mentioned a few weeks ago, used his last months before the Nazis murdered him to write the compelling *Letters from Prison*. Anne Frank kept her beautiful and sad diary while hiding from the Nazis in an attic. Henry David Thoreau wrote *On Civil Disobedience* inspired by his experience of a single night in jail, while Dorothy Day speaks in her *Long Loneliness* of the misery of just a few days in jail, after she was arrested protesting for women's right; it was that misery that cemented her sense

of human suffering and helplessness. Mahatma Gandhi wrote his autobiography, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, while locked up by the British because he wanted freedom for India. Martin Luther King wrote his very influential *Letter from the Birmingham Jail* that that jail, while Nelson Mandela wrote his autobiography, *Conversations with Myself*, during his 27 years in prison. There were losers too: the Marquis de Sade some of his most infamous works from a prison cell, while Adolph Hitler wrote his ghastly *Mein Kampf* while in prison. Check out a whole list here. Being stopped in one's tracks, left to face oneself, one's life at a standstill and passing before one's eyes may lead to new and powerful words, the right ones for what lies ahead. Creativity in confinement.

I mention all this, because our second reading this 25th Sunday in Ordinary Time (September 20) is another example of writing from prison, St. Paul's *Letter to the Philippians*. The reading we have is too brief (1:20c-24, 27a) and so we need to read more of the first chapter of the letter to begin to make sense of what is going on. We have the impression that Paul was always on the move, preaching and building communities across the Mediterranean. But now Paul is writing from prison, or under house arrest, possibly in Rome or Ephesus. Paul in prison is a hyper-busy man screeching to a halt, his wide-ranging ministry frozen in place. He pines away in captivity, having to look on with joy and a little envy while others do the active work that had been his. Yet he sees that his willingness to suffer for the message he preached is an inspiration to many in the community and even among his captors:

> "I want you to know, beloved, that what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to everyone else that my imprisonment is for Christ. Most of the brothers and sisters, having been made confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, dare to speak the word with greater boldness and without fear. (1.12-14)

But he is a realist too, and sees that while some continue the mission in his spirit, others seem to see Paul's captivity as chance to consign him to history and take his place:

> "Some proclaim Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from goodwill. These proclaim Christ out of love, knowing that I have been put here for the defense of the gospel; the others proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but intending to increase my suffering in my imprisonment." (1.15-17)

He seems not to know how long he will be in prison, or what will come next. He speaks of his deliverance, but he seems uncertain whether that means by death or in life:

> "Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance. It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be put to shame in any way, but that by my speaking with all boldness, Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death." (1.18-20)

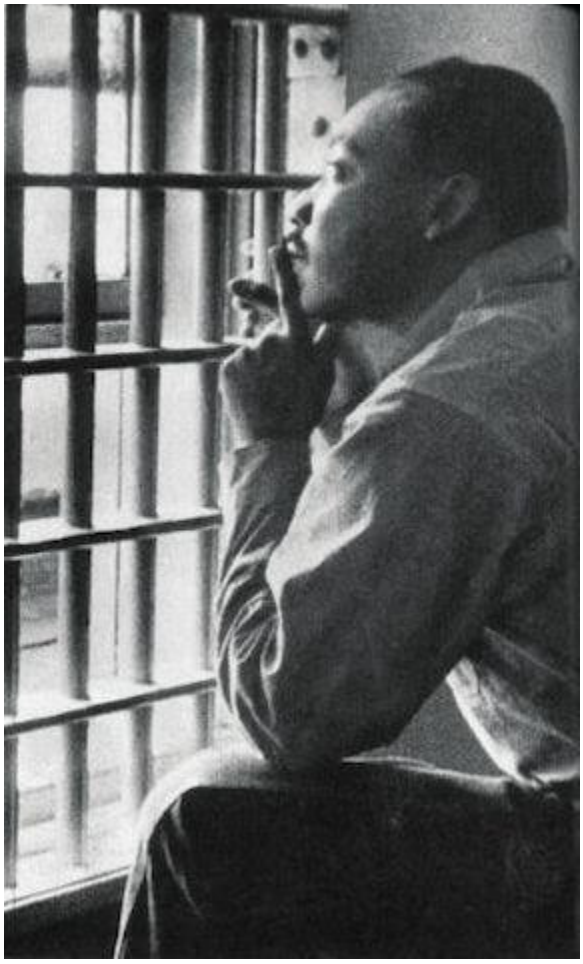
Like many a prisoner, Paul seems to confront a rather brutal uncertainty: might I now be better off leaving this life altogether? Or is there more for me to do here on earth? By instinct he gets to the heart of the matter, in unforgettable terms:

"For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I will choose. I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you." (1.21-24)

Some scholars think that Paul has passed through a period of depression, and that in this letter he is sharing his crisis of faith with the Church in Philippi, to put into words the intensity of the message he preaches. But in the end he decides that he cannot give up, because he wants to see the faith live on and grow in the lives of his readers:

> "Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith, so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again." (1.25-26)

Depending which imprisonment is the scene here, perhaps Paul was soon set free and able to return to his mission. Or perhaps his active days really are over as he nears the end of his life. But his confinement led at least to this beautiful letter to the Philippians, one of his deepest and most heartfelt expressions of the Christian message. Fortunately, we will be hearing more of this letter over the next three Sundays.



Paul, Gandhi, Mandela, King, Anne Frank, and a host of others: they all found their voice with a new power in their time in confinement. And in 2020 here *we* are, six months-plus into our own seclusion, quarantine, isolation, uncertain about how it all will end. It is perfect moment for us to take stock, to take a long view on our lives, to see ourselves in a new light, and so to begin to refashion who we are and how we shall act. Some of us may write more and better words in these forced circumstances; others among us will find renewed energy for their work, study, and basic priorities at home — or opt for a new job, new path; still others, perhaps just a few, will really want to go and "be with Christ" in a better world; and some of us, surely, are just stuck for the moment, not yet able to see beyond the dilemma of our lives on hold.

And who knows? After only six months, it may be far too soon to discern how our world, our country, our Church, and ourselves shall be and live after all this is over. Five years from now, long after Covid 19 has been contained, or (if you are young) ten or twenty or thirty years on, we can look back and count up what was lost and gained in these past six months. But if we are open to the grace of our confinement, then we may end up less frantic, stripped to the basics and more honest, more simply true to ourselves in how we imagine our present and our future and what it is that God is calling us still to do.

Pictures: Mahatma Gandhi, Anne Frank, St. Paul, Martin Luther King.

Video: An earlier version of this homily appears on the OLOS website as part of this weekend's Mass (posted on Saturday).

Reckless Love as a Way of Life

September 25, 2020

It was on September 27, 1970 — fifty years ago this Sunday — that I took my first vows as a Jesuit, pronouncing, along with one fellow novice, Daniel G. O'Hare, SJ (currently a professor of medical ethics in NYC who also consults widely on health care issues), this formula:

"Almighty and eternal God, I, Francis Xavier Clooney, understand how unworthy I am in your divine sight. Yet I am strengthened by your infinite compassion and mercy, and I am moved by the desire to serve you. I vow to your divine Majesty, before the most holy Virgin Mary and the entire heavenly court, perpetual chastity, poverty, and obedience in the Society of Jesus. I promise that I will enter this same Society to spend my life in it forever. I understand all these things according to the Constitutions of the Society of Jesus. Therefore, by your boundless goodness and mercy, and through the blood of Jesus Christ, I humbly ask that you judge this total commitment of myself acceptable. And as you have freely given me the desire to make this offering, so also may you give me the abundant grace to fulfill it. In New York, Thomas More Chapel, Fordham University, on the 27th day of September, in the year 1970."

The very idea of pronouncing such words in public at age twenty (after two years as a novice) still takes my breath away: the simple idea that so long ago I did something so bold and even reckless, when I was so young. I took a leap of faith when I did not know enough about life yet, and of course could not know how the years would unfold. And in the crazy year of 1970! (You may enjoy this St. Louis Jesuits setting of the related prayer, "Take and Receive," from the Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola.)

Fifty years later, I am amazed and grateful that it has worked out; I am still here, still at it, trying to make it work out. But all these years, the vows have been a risk,

and still are. As the great Jesuit scholar John Courtney Murray wrote in 1967, the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience are dangerous. They call for radical commitment over a lifetime, but if we live them in too careful a way, they can be infantilizing, the prospect of settled religious who play it safe but never really grow up. Indeed, in all these years I've never been asked to anything really really hard. *Poverty*: though I have no savings or house of my own even now, just turned seventy, I am not poor in obvious ways: I have money for all the things I need for my work, a roof over my head, food on the table. *Chastity*: though I have suffered the "long loneliness" of the celibate life, without the blessings of spouse and children, I have lived that life as a life of love, in Christ, among my Jesuit brothers and many friends. *Obedience*: though I have always been ready to do what the Society has asked of me, the message almost always has been: 'Stick with it, keep doing what you are doing' (as priest, as teacher, as scholar). Make bold choices, keep them alive as life goes on.
But you know all about this: choices made in youth that claim you for a lifetime, vows that are not so very dramatic, but rather quieter, played out in the long run: not a sprint, but a marathon. You know about making promises meant to last a lifetime, then struggling day by day to keep alive love's original flame. It is one thing to die for a cause; it is quite something else to stay true to one's original love for half a century.

I think of all this as I write this homily for the 26th Sunday in Ordinary Time, not merely to reminisce at your expense, but because this week we read further in St. Paul's Letter to the Philippians. This week the imprisoned Paul speaks to the community about making difficult, even radical choices that are to be lived out in heroic or everyday faith. Paul writes during or just after an existential crisis: what has my ministry added up to? should I continue and hope for release from prison, or would it be better to die and be with Christ? Having given his own testimony, this week he pushes his community. At the end of Philippians 1, he makes his appeal:

> "Just let your conduct be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of your affairs, how you stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel.

Don't let opposition daunt you, since God and God's good news are on your side:

> "Do not be in any way terrified by your adversaries. That gospel is to them a proof of perdition, but to you of salvation, and that from God." (Philippians 1.27-28)

He doubles down on the ideal of a selfless community that lives in joy, by love:

> "If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete:

be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others." (2.1-4)

And a few paragraphs later he writes:

"It is by your holding fast to the word of life that I can boast on the day of Christ that I did not run in vain or labor in vain. But even if I am being poured out as a libation over the sacrifice and the offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you— and in the same way you also must be glad and rejoice with me." (2.16-18)

Paul put his life on the line, recklessly living out his unexpected vocation. If you do the same, he says to the Philippians, my gamble will not have been in vain.

But there is more. Mindful of his own suffering and the price he has paid for his ministry, Paul tells them honestly that living the Christian life *may* cost them dearly:

> "For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake, having the same conflict which you saw in me and now hear in me." (1.29-30)

Paul did not know that he would end up in prison. He did not know at the point of this writing that, as ancient tradition tells us, he would eventually be stoned to death outside the walls of Rome. But in prison and by experience Paul knows that the commitment to Christ is a leap in the dark. To bring home the fact that this commitment is open-ended and of necessity unsure, a choice for a life that can have few securities or guarantees, Paul then quotes, in the most famous part of Philippians, an early Christian hymn that speaks to the far-fetched and reckless love played out by the God the Son:

> "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
> who, though he was in the form of God,
> did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,
> but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness,
> and being found in human form,
> he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death —

even death on a cross." (2.5-8)

We take for granted this passage, we hear it on Palm Sunday every year: Jesus Christ is the Son of God, incarnate; he carried out his ministry and died on the cross — and three days later rose again.

Yes, but let us not rush to happy conclusions. From Paul's perspective, this is all about the Son's daring leap in the dark, his reckless discard for power and position, the gamble in faith that ended up on the cross, a shameful, total failure. Paul is daring his readers to do the same: build community, become one in mind and heart, even if you do not see how it will end, even if it keeps seeming to end more in loss than in gain.

Only later, after burial in a sealed tomb, does vindication come:

> "Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." (2.9-11)

The real drama — of Christ, of Paul, of you and me — is not merely a nice two-step death-and-resurrection, as if there'll be a bit of difficulty on the way to glory. Paul's message is about faith's choice on a long and shadowed path, fueled by an imprudent, holy desire that there will be Act Two, restoration and the fullness of life. Jesus was dead; *then* God raised him up. We promise to live lives of love, we walk our path step by step, and we see where faith leads us: dramas of great faith or quiet stories of remaining true to our promises. "Only this" does Paul ask of his readers.

Taking vows fifty years ago this Sunday is not nothing — if I say so myself! — but as I look back, the modest drama of my life — the excitement of the priest professor at home in 02138! — does not in the least measure up to the drama of the cross of Jesus, or the trauma of Paul's own fiery zeal and imprisonment and violent death, or the amazing sacrifices of innumerable faithful people — Christian, but also Jewish, and of many other faiths as well — who have risked everything because they believed and loved recklessly, to the extreme.

But most of us do not get to live lives of high drama, clear-cut harrowing adventures, the ups and downs of shocking losses and amazing triumphs. But we can still gamble everything on truths and values we mean to stick with as long as we live, enacted in small everyday choices: we become Jesuits or we marry or we have partners or we find our way on our own. We make mistakes, we recover; we choose this career and not that career, we stick with a plan or switch jobs in the middle of things. We claim to be companions of Jesus. We gamble that even if our chosen path is long and lonely, God is there at the start, in the middle, and at the end, walking with us, waiting for us in depths and heights, but also on the every day paths of ordinary life.

Photos: My parents Irene and James and myself; Fabritius' Stoning of Saints Paul and Barnabas; Holbein's Christ in the Tomb; at the crossroads.

The Yoga of St. Paul (and St. Francis)

October 2, 2020

I have been teaching a course on the Yoga Sutras this semester. This brief text – really, just 196 short lines – is a classic of ancient India in the Sanskrit language and nearly 2000 years old. It sketches in detail and with subtlety the process of reaching spiritual maturity, peace and freedom, by a deep quieting of the mind, a growing detachment from everything in the world that we desire most and fear most — a quieting that allows the self to be calm and free, no matter what happens. When we think of yoga, we think of the physical postures, positions of great elegance and beauty that too often seem impossible (at least for me!). Yoga does respect the necessity for equilibrium in body, psyche, mind and heart, but then uses it for the sake of a recovery of one's deepest self (in utter simplicity) — and, if one pays close attention to the Sutras, a reclaiming of the world around us, freedom within it, energy to move through it with ease, peace, and power.

All this comes to mind as this Sunday (October 4, the 27th Sunday in Ordinary Time) we return again to St. Paul's Letter to the Philippians. Paul is not only a man with a mission, but a man striving as best he can to keep the faith, even in a time of deep uncertainty — will he die in prison? is his life's work a waste? — as he hopes by this letter to bring to life for his readers his vision of faith fully alive.

Last week we saw him begging his readers to live with the mind and spirit of Christ in them — not only if they are called to martyrdom, but especially if they are called to live a long and steady life in community, risking all in the hands of God in the day to day fidelity of small things. As the letter goes on he strips away all that is unnecessary, simplifying the very meaning of the spiritual life, that all might be

restored. In Philippians 3, he did the hard work of discarding false self and welcoming true Self:

Confronting the ego: On the one hand, he knows that he is of a privileged background:

> "…If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless." (3.4-6)

Detachment, loss, and rebirth in Christ: On the other, Paul is ready now to throw it all aside, once more gambling on Christ alone:

> "But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead." (3.7-10)

Or as Paul puts it still more starkly in Galatians, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ Jesus who lives in me." (2.20)

Openness to the future: This surrender of his own self-identity and self-control opens into a still greater freedom at the race's end:

> "Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Sisters and brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus." (3.12-14)

> **Imagining the new self:** Now, in Philippians 4 whence today's actual reading is taken, Paul consolidates the series of virtues he has found to be basic to his own life, for the sake of their lives too:

> "Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I say, rejoice! Let your gentleness be known to all people. The Lord is at hand. Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus." (4.4-7)

Like the discipline of letting go and finding simplicity in nothing but Christ, these virtues too flow together: joy, gentleness, lack of anxiety, prayer, thanksgiving, deep and endless peace in Christ. Together they are basic to a person and a

community filled in Christ, detached from self and world, yet deeply happy and deeply at peace.

It would make sense for Philippians to end here, under the protection of Christ, the community at peace in mind and heart. But what is most striking is the next verse:

Recovering the whole world: "Finally, sisters and brothers, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things." (4.8)

With no restrictions, no religious boundaries, all things surrendered by now, Paul begs his readers to receive back the entire world: fear nothing, embrace every human value, art and culture, the true and the holy, virtue and love. Whatever meets these criteria, wherever they are to be found — can become the object of Christian contemplation. In the world of Greece and Rome, this is a very early manner of Christian humanism: all that is human is from God, humans fully alive are the glory of God (as St. Irenaeus might have put it).

Give up everything, receive it all back. I am calling this the “Yoga of St. Paul” not to literally indicate that he practiced yoga (though he would not have been less a saint had he done so), but rather to highlight that his long years of spiritual practice as pious Jew, fiery zealot and Christian missionary, prisoner facing death, together chart an advance in wisdom, a deep human (and humane) learning, a steady Christian maturing that by way of surrender embraces all of God’s world. The world is good and beautiful, sin and ugliness not withstanding, and now it is all yours, my sisters and brothers in Philippi.

Such a vision was surely as improbable then as it is now in our sordid 2020. We are at a loss in this interminable pandemic year, imprisoned, in doubt about the future of ourselves, our country, our world, wondering whether it still makes sense to still bet on human decency and Christian virtue. Part at least of what we used to be is gone forever. But Paul tells us first to keep on, to go deeper, retrieving our true selves, stripping away the surfaces, not only to stabilize a Christian identity that will survive the pandemic, but also to reclaim the world around us: worthy of our contemplation each day, deep down still true, noble, just, pure, lovely, rich in virtue, deserving our thanks and praise.

Thus this Sunday's vision, the yoga of St. Paul. But let me end by turning to another great figure in Christian history, the poor man of Assisi. This Sunday, October 4, is the feast of St. Francis, the most universally beloved of all the saints. He too gave up everything, literally stripped off his clothing and returned it to his merchant father, even as he renounced his inheritance and walked away, no longer protected against life's uncertainties. He took to heart in a most literal way the call to rebuild the Church, stone by stone, heart by heart. He loved the Crucified Jesus to the point of his own crucifixion, enduring the stigmata's nail holes in his hands and feet.

But for him too, the loss of everything ended in reclaiming the world around him, and this is why he could preach even to the birds, and sing his great Canticle of Sun and Moon:

Praised be You my Lord with all Your creatures, especially Sir Brother Sun,
Who is the day through whom You give us light.
And he is beautiful and radiant with great splendor,
Of You Most High, he bears the likeness.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars,
In the heavens you have made them bright, precious and fair.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Brothers Wind and Air,
And fair and stormy, all weather's moods, by which You cherish all that You have made.

Praised be You my Lord through Sister Water, so useful, humble, precious and pure.

Praised be You my Lord through Brother Fire,
through whom You light the night and he is beautiful and playful and robust and strong.

Praised be You my Lord through our Sister, Mother Earth who sustains and governs us,
Producing varied fruits with colored flowers and herbs.

Praise be You my Lord through those who grant pardon for love of You and bear sickness and trial.

Blessed are those who endure in peace, By You Most High, they will be crowned.

Praised be You, my Lord through Sister Death, from whom no-one living can escape.

> Praise and bless my Lord and give Him thanks, and serve Him with great humility. Amen!

Find the whole of the Canticle here, and listen to this lovely and familiar setting. Then sit quietly, breathe deeply, and ponder your own yogic path these past six months.

Loving Kindness Is What Matters

October 9, 2020

This is the fourth and final Sunday on which we can hear and delight in sections of St. Paul's *Letter to the Philippians*. Last week was surely my own favorite, since we heard his magnificent invitation to honor all that is good and true and beautiful, noble and honest, and to think upon such things — without any stipulation of this or that language or culture, the Christian but not the pagan, etc. All things are from God, so rejoice in whatever is good and beautiful.

If I were Paul, I might have stopped on that exalted plane, the mysticism of God in all things. But on this 28th Sunday in Ordinary Time (October 11), we have still more verses from Philippians 4, reaching the end of the letter, and I cannot ignore these. Here Paul comes back down to earth, as he thanks his readers for their financial support for his ministry and, we may presume, their charity during the imprisonment we first heard about in Philippians 1. He appreciates greatly how they stood with him when others did not:

> "As you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid more than once when I was in need… I have received full payment and have more than enough. I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. (Philippians 4.15-18)

And now, although there had been a gap in their assistance due to unnamed obstacles, they have come through again:

> "I rejoiced greatly in the Lord that at last you renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you were concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. (4.10)

Why does it matter? Not, he insists, because he could not have otherwise managed to stay alive and carry on the mission:

> "I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and

> every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength. (4.11-13)

Paul says this not merely to pat himself on the back, but to avoid reducing his thanksgiving to the de facto financial support that has come through: yes, we needed the money, but it is the love and thoughtfulness behind the gift that matter more. These have built a mutual bond, wherein members of the community far and near support one another as best they can, in the mundane and ordinary course of life. Ordinary Philippians have made do with less, in order to help him. Their generosity was like prayer, as holy as any ritual offering:

> "They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God. (4.14)

Paul promises them an abundance in return, God caring for them in all their needs — surely not by an influx of Roman gold and silver, but far more, by the unsurpassable love of God in Christ:

> "My God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus. To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen. (4.19-20)

We don't know who these Philippians were, Paul does not name them. But they persevered, they gave what they could, they helped Paul by sticking by him, and so God blesses them in return: the great circle of loving kindness. At the letter's end, Paul acknowledges this wider community of sisters and brothers near and far. Indeed, we learn that Paul is not actually all alone. There is a community around him as he writes, and that community is now bonded to the community in distant Philippi:

> "Greet all God's people in Christ Jesus. The brothers and sisters who are with me send greetings. All God's people here send you greetings, especially those who belong to Caesar's household. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen. (4.21-22)

What is the bond? Not direct familiarity or location or even shared memories, but only a persistent intention to care for one another, day by day. Give what you can, give in order to keep things running, give even when no one notices. Quiet kindness matters, even if Paul will still be martyred, even if Rome will still decline and fall, even if new powers will arise and new empires form to oppress still more people worldwide. But no matter: a loving community cares for its members in need, as the work of Christ's good news continues uninterrupted even in dangerous times.

This modest and (extra)ordinary loving kindness catches my attention, precisely because it is so ordinary and undramatic. And countercultural. Do what you can; that is enough. Do not let heroic ideals ruin what you actually do.

There is so much wrong in 2020 — a sad list no one need enumerate — that simple, quiet, steadfast, patient generosity may be seen as timid, pushed aside as if not bold and loud enough to capture the headlines. But we need to think in the opposite way. Particularly when we are all far apart, love all the more, for love crosses every barrier, every gap, the miles in between. We know very well that in every ordinary way we need to keep working; jobs needs to be done, bills paid, as the everyday work of good people and good Christians continues. We try to give, as we can, of our money — or of our time, or by simple love for neighbor, or through prayers in the night. Think of activities woven into the life of our parish: visits to nursing homes; outreach to prisoners; the Children of Chernobyl project; religious education, even online; lectors, cantors, and musicians showing up to record a Mass on Friday for our zoomed Sundays. And on and on! No headlines, just gracing the world, one small deed at a time.

A hundred years from now people will look back on 2020, and may wonder, “How did they survive that awful year?” But they will also ask, “How is it that so many small and quiet acts of generosity still took place again and again, resistant to that year’s calamities? How did they find the courage and hope to do good things when the world was falling apart?” The problem of evil is one thing; the miracle of good is even greater. Paul knew this, and he thanked God for this everyday mystery.

As I come to a close, I cannot help but note the providential good timing: Pope Francis' wonderful new encyclical letter, Fratelli Tutti (All My Brothers — and of course *My Sisters*) was released just last Sunday, the feast of St. Francis. It is all about "our learning to be sisters and brothers, cultivating social friendship" - loving kindess lived as a way of life. Right in the first paragraph Pope Francis catches a challenge crucial to our times:

> "Of the counsels St. Francis offered, I would like to select the one in which he calls for *a love that transcends the barriers of geography and distance*, and declares blessed all those who love their brother or sister "as much when they are far away from him as when there are nearby." In his simple and direct way, Saint Francis expressed the essence of a fraternal openness that allows us to acknowledge, appreciate and love each person, regardless of physical proximity, regardless of where he or she was born or lives. (n. 1, part)

Francis does not quote Philippians in *Fratelli Tutti*, but he does offer sentiments on kindness and decency perfectly suited to Philippians 4, so I will let the Pope have the last words:

> "Saint Paul describes kindness as a fruit of the Holy Spirit (*Galatians* 5:22). He uses the Greek word *chrestótes*, which describes an attitude that is gentle, pleasant and supportive, not rude or coarse. Individuals who possess this quality help make other people's lives more bearable, especially by sharing the weight of their problems, needs and fears. This way of treating others can take different forms: an act of kindness, a concern not to offend by word or deed, a readiness to alleviate their burdens. It involves "speaking words of comfort, strength, consolation and encouragement" and not "words that demean, sadden, anger or show scorn".
>
> "Kindness frees us from the cruelty that at times infects human relationships, from the anxiety that prevents us from thinking of others, from the frantic flurry of activity that forgets that others also have a right to be happy. Often nowadays we find neither the time nor the energy to stop and be kind to others, to say "excuse me", "pardon me", "thank you". Yet every now and

then, miraculously, a kind person appears and is willing to set everything else aside in order to show interest, to give the gift of a smile, to speak a word of encouragement, to listen amid general indifference.

"If we make a daily effort to do exactly this, we can create a healthy social atmosphere in which misunderstandings can be overcome and conflict forestalled. Kindness ought to be cultivated; it is no superficial bourgeois virtue. Precisely because it entails esteem and respect for others, once kindness becomes a culture within society it transforms lifestyles, relationships and the ways ideas are discussed and compared. Kindness facilitates the quest for consensus; it opens new paths where hostility and conflict would burn all bridges. (nn. 223-224)

(You can find an earlier version of this homily ‘live’ at the Our Lady of Sorrows website, in the recorded Mass for this weekend. And, by the way, I kept using the term "loving kindness" in the preceding paragraphs. It is actually a famous Buddhist term too, and you can read more here, the meditations of the Venerable Nanamoli, a famous Buddhist monk, on the theme.)

Caesar's Coin — the Least of Our Problems

October 16, 2020

Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words. They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians. "Teacher," they said, "we know that you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren't swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are. Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?"

But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, "You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? Show me the coin used for paying the tax." They brought him a denarius, and he asked them, "Whose image is this? And whose inscription?"

"Caesar's," they replied.

Then he said to them, "So give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."

When they heard this, they were amazed. So they left him and went away. (Matthew 22.15-21)

It is tempting to see it as providential that we have this Gospel on the 29th Sunday in Ordinary Time, just two weeks before the election. But the problem is that the text does not tell us what to do, who to vote for. "How would you vote, Jesus?" we ask. "Give politics and political power due respect," he might reply, "but at the same time, give to God what is God's." Not the one nor the other, but both. This is good advice, we may surmise, but it does not tell us how to vote on November 3.

To make better sense of this enigmatic teaching, we need to turn to the gloomy context in which this teaching occurs. In Matthew 21, Jesus enters Jerusalem for the final time, in a triumphant scene that surely scares his enemies, but occurs just a few days before his shocking death. But Matthew, like Mark before him, then fills

the days with increasingly hard and harsh scenes. Jesus makes a whip and drives the money changers from the temple. He curses a fig tree because it does not bear fruit when he passes it:

> "Seeing a fig tree by the road, he went up to it but found nothing on it except leaves. Then he said to it, “May you never bear fruit again!” Immediately the tree withered. (21.19)

And then there is a tense set of confrontational scenes that follow, eight altogether. In Matthew 21,

> 1. Jesus refuses to justify his authority — by confronting them with the question of John the Baptist, whom Herod killed. Where does religious authority come from?
>
> 2. Jesus tells the parable of the two sons, the one who says yes but does nothing, and the one who says no, but then does the right thing.
>
> 3. Jesus tells the parable of the vineyard, the resentful tenants, and the slaughter that follows.

In Matthew 22, where today’s Gospel is found, the ominous parables and confrontations continue:

> 4. Jesus tells the parable of the wedding feast, the resentful guests, and the slaughter that follows.
>
> 5. The question of the tax, and the dilemma of God and Caesar, our Gospel passage today.
>
> 6. They introduce the nearly absurd case of the woman who married in turn seven brothers all of whom died: to whom is she married in the afterlife?
>
> 7. Questioned, Jesus insists that the Law is captured in two great commandments: Love God, love your neighbor. This is the more serene of the eight encounters, and will be our Gospel next Sunday, October 25.
>
> 8. Interrogated about the Messiah — Is he David’s son? — Jesus replies, No, you cannot pin him down that way. The Messiah is from God.

As Matthew 22 ends, Jesus has reduced his powerful and learned antagonists to silence:

> No one was able to answer him a word, nor from that day on did anyone dare to ask him any more questions. (22.46)

But things do not get better right away. In Matthew 23, Jesus launches into a long series of woes, excoriating the would-be leaders of the people, and weeps over the doomed city of Jerusalem. In Matthew 24, he predicts vividly the destruction of the Temple. And, of course, only a few days later these same leaders, for the moment thwarted and not daring to question Jesus further, will be working with the Romans to have him murdered.

It is in this gloomy context then, the tense final days of the ministry of Jesus and this prolonged combat of wits and words, that we have today's argument about Caesar's coin. It is simply the fifth in the series of eight confrontations. That is, it is not special wisdom, as if Matthew (or Mark before him) had decided to take up church-state relations in the context of the last and holiest week of the life of Jesus.

So shall we pay the tax to Caesar, whose brutal army is occupying our country? In a sense Jesus trivializes this big question, suggesting that they simply return to Caesar his coins, those little metal things with Caesar's face on them. But they are also to give to God what is God's — but what is not God's? God cannot be so easily reduced to a face, a name, a small thing you can keep in your pocket or give away.

Jesus in an odd way is agreeing with them: there is no divinely ordained answer as to how God and Caesar should relate. You can get in trouble by complete deference to secular power, but also by dreaming of a theocracy protective of your own religion. Life is not so easy. The solution seems to be that individuals have to discern and to make choices: as to how to balance this world and the things of God, in the year 33 or in 2020.

But most basically, the point of these accumulated encounters and arguments is that Jesus, newly arrived in Jerusalem, really is the one they have been waiting for, despite their petty resentments. In all eight instances of parable and confrontation, the underlying point is that these leaders and scholars have been resisting Jesus as the one sent by God. They cannot believe it, as if they are thinking, "No real messiah would stand here arguing with us." They are insulted by

the obviousness of the moment. Caesar is not their problem — their own stupidity and malice are. In this context, the tax is a small matter: Caesars come and go.

Sorry to be so gloomy! But such is today's Gospel, which we have to read not as detached wisdom on politics and religion, but as one more battle between fakery and truth, grubby power and God's presence among us.

If today's Gospel does not tell us how to vote (nor will I, in this homily), what can we take away from it? First, perhaps we can be consoled by the fact that our awful 2020 is matched by the awfulness of the world Jesus found himself in. There is no irenic, perfect past that we can flee to, where Christ's teachings reigned supreme and everyone had the same values. Second, there is no neat solution as to how the Gospel and politics are to mesh, and certainly no predigested answer as to how Catholics are to vote in 2020: figure it out for yourself, Jesus might say, balance the wants of political power and your obligations to God, and live a life that fits that balance. Finally, the deepest message may be this: there will always be resistance to God's arrival in our midst, resentment against those who speak honestly in God's name, spurts of violence aimed at quashing the truth. In 2020, like two thousand years ago, key is to be open to God's reality in our lives, God's unexpected arrival, God's inconvenient truth. And if we are open to God, if we give back to God the everything that is God's due, then politics will be relatively easy by comparison. Read the Gospel, encounter Jesus who always tells the hard truths, and then read up, study the issues, and use your common sense in figuring out how to vote.

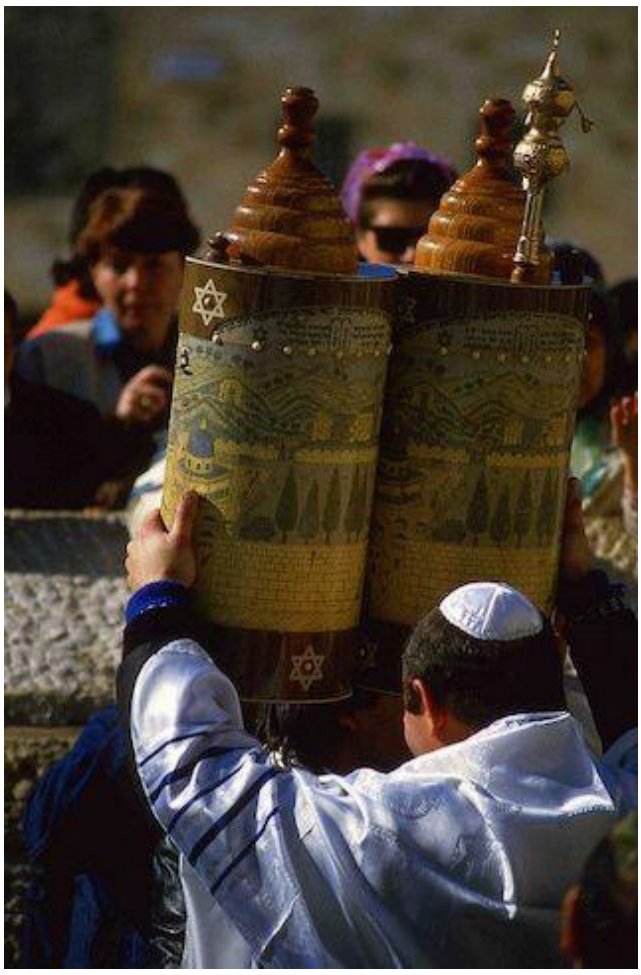
Endnote: It is important to remember that even if these chapters in Matthew highlight the opposition to Jesus of certain leading Pharisees and learned scholars of the Law, this does **not** mean that all Pharisees were wicked or all scholars of the Law blind to God's truth and goodness. Not the case, never the case. Jesus surely had pious and learned friends and admirers who were Pharisees and Saducees and Scribes. There is no excuse at all in these chapters to demean Jewish faith and tradition.

Bonus: On Thursday, October 22 at 430pm the Study of Religion at Harvard is hosting a conversation on religion and the elections, with three distinguished Catholic participants: James Kloppenberg, Charles Warren Professor of American History, and E.J. Dionne, Visiting Professor in Religion and Political Culture at HDS, for a conversation on religion and the 2020 election. It will be moderated by Catherine Brekus, Charles Warren Professor of the History of Religion in America at HDS. Register for the webinar or watch on the HDS Facebook page.

When They Cry Out to Me, I Will Hear Them

October 23, 2020

"Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”



"Jesus replied: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” (Matthew 22.34-40)

This Gospel, for this 30th Sunday in Ordinary Time, is of course one of the most beautiful of the teachings of Jesus and among the teachings in the Bible as a whole. These two commandments reach down to the roots of our faith and at the same time offer a teaching that is universally respected across the world and in resonance with every religious (and spiritual) tradition.

We should first of all take *the question* seriously. The expert in the law was asking a difficult question: of all the laws in the Torah, all five books of Moses, which is the greatest? This presumably did not mean “the one law that we should obey while dropping all the rest,” but that which comes first and provides the grounding for everything else that a religious person also does.

You could experiment with this. Try reading through the commandments given to Israel in the Torah and in the Prophets, and then narrow down those commandments to the most important ten or twelve. Then narrow that list down to

five or six, and then three, and finally just one, the most important, the greatest. Which one is the most important? Not easy — even Jesus chose two commandments, not one. As Christians, we can do the same with the New Testament, or even just with the Gospels: list all the things Jesus commands us to do, and decide which among them is non-negotiable, essential to being a follower of Christ. Leave everything and follow me? Call no man your father? Pray with these words, "Our Father..."? Do not worry about tomorrow? Do this in memory of me? Or simply, "Love your neighbor as yourself"?

You could also more simply examine yourself as a 21st century person of faith: which passage in the Bible is the greatest — most powerful, most life-giving — for you personally, words that are your guide in life, refuge in time of trouble, the challenge that wakes you up? For myself, I might start with the call of Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1), or the call of the apostles (John 1), or perhaps the Philippians 4 passage we heard at Mass several weeks ago. Or is there another text - a story, a poem, from any scripture or by any author - that is your go-to guide for life? Find your life-giving texts, re-read them, take them to heart, and then try once more, to love God and love our neighbors.

But if today we are commanded to love God and love our neighbor, we need to face the follow-up question: how actually to live out such commands? Surely the answer is given in practice, in what people actually do. If we recall that Jesus is answering the lawyer just several days before his death, we can say: see how Jesus lived out his ministry to the end, how he loved God and neighbor even to the giving of his life. Or as Philippians 2 puts it, see how he emptied himself, even to death, death on the cross - is that not love of God and love of neighbor?

As for the innumerable good Jewish people of the time of Jesus, what did it mean to obey these commandments? Surely the Torah texts Jesus is quoting would come to mind. First,

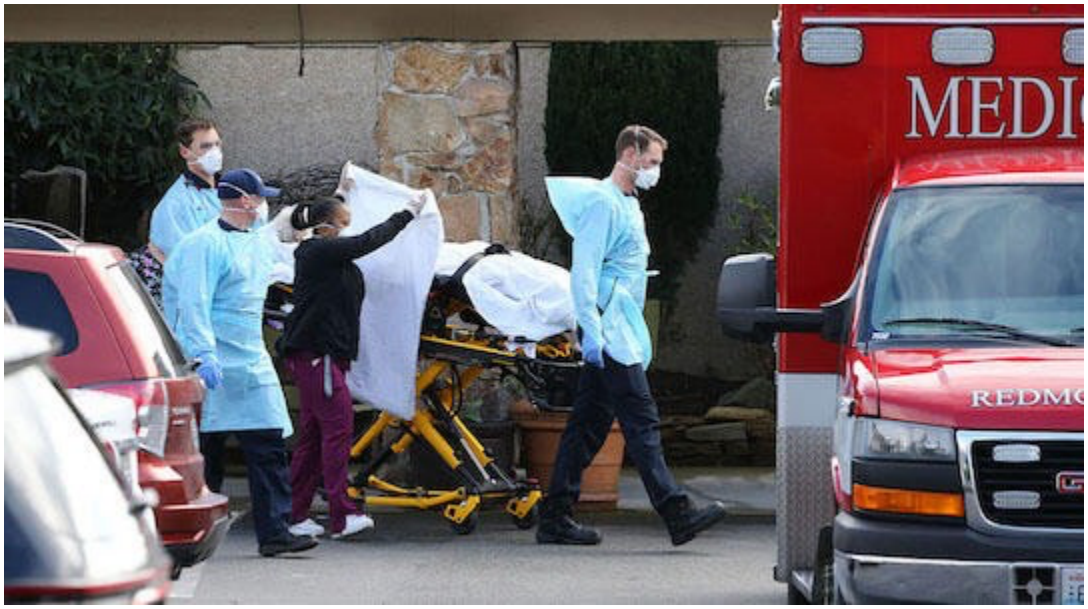
"Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. *Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.*

Such words are to be woven intimately into the life of every pious Jew:

> "These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write

them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates. (Deuteronomy 6.4-8)

Loving God is not merely a good idea, or an isolated credal statement: it is rather a total love, a garment we wear, the visible sign of who we are as individuals and families and whole communities. It then overflows into a love in this world, with and for those around us.



As for loving God then by loving our neighbor: In the remarkable and quite difficult 19th chapter of Leviticus (read it for yourself, you will be puzzled, or shocked), these lines would surely jump out at readers, Jews or early Christians:

> "Do not do anything that endangers your neighbor's life. I am the Lord. Do not hate a fellow Israelite in your heart. Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in their guilt. Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but *love your neighbor as yourself*. I am the Lord... When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them. The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. *Love them as yourself,* for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the Lord your God. (Leviticus 19.16-18, 33-34)

Our first reading on this Sunday gets even more specific, by way of some verses from Exodus 22. Here too, foreigners and migrants, the poor and vulnerable, come to mind first:

> "Do not mistreat or oppress a foreigner, for you were foreigners in Egypt. Do not take advantage of the widow or the fatherless. If you do and they cry out to me, I will certainly hear their cry. My anger will be aroused, and I will kill you with the sword; your wives will become widows and your children fatherless.

Yet there is more, since this is about concrete things such as money and clothing and a place to live:

> "If you lend money to one of my people among you who is needy, do not treat it like a business deal; charge no interest. If you take your neighbor's cloak as a pledge, return it by sunset, because that cloak is the only covering your neighbor has. What else can they sleep in? When they cry out to me, I will hear, for I am compassionate. (Exodus 22:20-26)

So what about us? In 2020, in our woeful year, amid pandemic, environmental disaster, the disease of endemic racial injustice, political warfare such as none of us has ever seen, and a week before a perilously important election: how should you and I love God and love our neighbor?

Our neighbor surely includes those nearest to us, family, friends, and the people living nearby. But it is also a matter of a wider vision of neighbor — think of the Good Samaritan parable in Luke — that includes the imprisoned, the migrant and the refugee, persons marginalized for all kinds of reason, be it race or religion, or poverty, or life choices, or sexual identity, etc.

How can we, in the dreary fall of 2020, find the energy and courage to love in practice, steadfastly, without discouragement? We need to look into our own inner depths, seeking God there, getting back in touch with the divine Spirit of love who makes love in action possible. St. Augustine is said to have said, "Love God, then do what you will." This is true, since love begets love. God acts in us whenever we love as best we can. Grounded in love, we will be able to not give up trying to practice love body and soul, mind and heart, among neighbors old and new.

To Be a Saint: In Suffering, in Service, in Wisdom

October 30, 2020

This Sunday would normally have been the 31st Sunday in Ordinary Time, but this year that is preempted by All Saints Day. This is of course a major feast in the Church calendar, and a feast of special importance that we do well to ponder in 2020. We desperately need saints, of different kinds, as different as all the people in God's holy family.

All Saints Day is not, after all, a time to celebrate the *canonized* saints of the Church, famed figures who appear here and there on the calendar. Rather, this is the feast of *all* the saints, *all* the holy women and men who have been the heart and soul of the Christian community from the beginning until now.

The readings for this feast are set, the same every year. Yet they fruitfully speak to us of saintliness — holiness — reached by three paths: of suffering, of service, and of wisdom.

The first reading is from the Book of Revelation 7, the famous vision of 144,000 women and men in white robes who have come through harrowing times:

> "These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. (Revelation 7.14)

Revelation is intimating that the 144,000 represent the fullness of God's people, the twelve tribes of the new Israel, gathered as those who suffered and been transformed by the blood of martyrdom, the blood of Christ. Suffering is redeemed. No suffering need be mere suffering, sheer waste. To say this — redeeming suffering — is not to justify wickedness or cruelty nor to excuse oppressors, but only to say that what others do to us cannot destroy us. In union with Christ crucified, all suffering is to be seen in a new light as redemptive, filling out the community of the holy ones with those who have kept the faith even when all seemed lost. The promise is true:

> "Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst.
> The sun will not beat down on them," nor any scorching heat.

For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd.
“He will lead them to springs of living water,” and "God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” (7.16-17)

Second, one can be a saint by way of service. Our Gospel passage today is the well-known and well-loved opening of the Sermon on the Mount, the blessings that Jesus proclaims in announcing his vision of God’s kingdom:

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.
Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled.
Blessed are the merciful, for they shall be shown mercy.
Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.
Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God.
Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5.3-10)

This saintliness too can be honored in heaven, but surely it is lived and worked out here and now, day by day, in the world of everyday life and needs. Mourning with those who mourn in our sorrowful 2020; showing mercy, forgiving and being forgiven in 2020's unforgiving society; hungering for righteousness in a systemically unfair 2020; working for peace in a 2020 riven with strife and violence. If we aim to be holy in all we do, then the Kingdom of God is embodied among us.

Third, there is the way of wisdom. This is glimpsed in our second reading, the beginning of the third chapter of the First Letter of St. John. We get just three verses, but in fact the whole chapter beautifully gives us a real sense of the love of God permeating the life of God’s people:

"This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does

> not do what is right is not God's child, nor anyone who does not love their brother and sister. For this is the message you heard from the beginning: *We should love one another.* (I John 3.10-11)

We are called to be like Jesus himself, who not only spoke of love, but lived and died for love. The words that follow are as strong as any we find in the Prophets of Israel or the Letter of James:

> "And this is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us, and so we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth… And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us. The one who keeps God's commands lives in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us. (3.16-18, 23-24)

The gift of the Spirit finally brings us back to the start of the chapter, the three verses that are today's first reading. It is only by spiritual transformation that we find our true identities as children of God, deeply like Christ:

> "See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Dear friends, we are now children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears,we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure. (3.1-3)

These verses speak directly to the spiritual transformation that is the wellspring of holiness. The more we see Christ, just as he is in his crucified and risen glory, the more we will be like him — crucified, risen, pure, holy, loving in practice, in times of danger too. No surprise: as contemplative traditions across the world teach us in various ways, we become what we see, when our vision is steady and undistracted by the million other things we might look at. (Thus the Sermon: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.") And, of course, by seeing and becoming con-formed to the Christ we see, we become saints.

Suffering, service, wisdom. You could glean other insights from these three readings, since there are so many ways to be holy. Or if you wish, you could say these three ways are really one way, the way of love. Love in sorrow, love in all you do, love in seeing the Beloved. Love at all times. We can do this, because, as loved and graced, we are already saints. Today is *our* festive day too, is it not?

On the Five Foolish Young Women: Lamp Oil Was Never Their Problem

November 6, 2020

As the Church year comes to a close, this Sunday (the 32nd week in Ordinary Time, November 8), November 15, and even November 22 (the feast of Christ the King, this year the earliest it can be) all draw on Matthew 25, giving us in a row three famous teachings by Jesus that signal the nature of God's kingdom in the end time: the parable of "the wise and foolish virgins" (1-13), the parable of the ten, five and one talents of gold entrusted to servants by their master (14-30), and the parable of the last judgment, Christ separating the sheep and goats on the basis of their care for the needy in this world (31-46).

To be honest, the weirdest of them is this week's, which claims (Matthew 25.1) that the kingdom of heaven is like this:

"Ten virgins took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish and five were wise.

The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. The wise ones, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep.

At midnight the cry rang out: "Here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!"

Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish ones said to the wise, "Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out." "No," they replied, "there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves."

But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut.

> Later the others also came. “Lord, Lord,” they said, “open the door for us!”
>
> But he replied, “Truly I tell you, I don’t know you.” (Matthew 25.1-13)

Weird indeed. Think of the details, like no wedding you’ve ever been to: there is a wedding feast, but the bridegroom has not arrived, even by the middle of the night; no mention is made of a bride or of other guests; the “virgins” — young, unmarried women — are waiting for him, but without any indication when he is supposed to arrive or why there is delay; the foolish young women go off to buy more oil for their lamps in the middle of the night; when the bridegroom arrives, he rushes inside with the wise young women, and locks the door; he is then harsh toward the others who arrive too late with more oil in their lamps, rebuking them through the locked door: “I don’t know you.”

Such is the kingdom of God, Jesus tells us. *Really*?

If we wanted to salvage some sensible wisdom, it would be easy to interpret this as a story about prudence, the need to be realistic and prepared if we are to do the work of the kingdom. Think of the admonition in Luke 14: don’t start building a tower if you don’t have sufficient materials to complete it; don’t pick a fight if you cannot possibly win it.

But the kingdom of God seems hardly a matter of prudence of that sort, particularly in the last days that are upon us in Matthew 25. I found a better clue in an unusual academic lecture by a scholar named J. Massyngbaerde Ford, given at the University of East Africa in 1965 (contact me if you want more details). Ford says that the parable may at least indirectly be an echo of the Song of Songs, the Bible’s most beautiful book. With great poignancy, in Song 5 the beloved comes in the night and knocks on the young woman’s door, and she must with some regret arise from her sleep in order to let him in to her chamber:

> "I slept but my heart was awake. Listen! My beloved is knocking:
> “Open to me, my sister, my darling, my dove, my flawless one.
> My head is drenched with dew, my hair with the dampness of the night.”
> I have taken off my robe— must I put it on again?
> I have washed my feet— must I soil them again?
> My beloved thrust his hand through the latch-opening; my heart began to pound for him.
> I arose to open for my beloved, and my hands dripped with myrrh,
> my fingers with flowing myrrh, on the handles of the bolt.

But she is slow in getting there, and he is gone:

"I opened for my beloved, but my beloved had left; he was gone. My heart sank at his departure. I looked for him but did not find him. I called him but he did not answer. (Song of Songs 5.1-6)

Like that, the foolish young women come back too late, when the door is locked. It would take much longer for me to sort out the erudite details of Ford's learned essay, but for today's reflection on Matthew 25, even a possible link with the Song helps us think differently about today's parable. In light of the Song, the young women now watching and waiting for the bridegroom turn out themselves at least symbolically to be the (otherwise missing) bride. They watch and wait because, as they may not fully realize, the wedding will be their own celebration of union with their beloved who comes in the night.

[Of course we ought not press the literal details too far. The marriage is symbolic, not a bridegroom with all five wise young women at once. Each loves fully, and is loved fully, but not in any ordinary human space. Indeed, the scene reminds me of a scene famous in Hindu India. The young god Krishna, living for a time in a quiet village, dances with the cowherd women (gopis) a dance of exuberant love — each young woman thinking that he belongs to her alone. God loves us all — yes, *but God loves me*. Krishna comes and goes, and those who wait for him to return will join in his dance, the dance in which they are the entire world for one another.]

In this light, Matthew 25 highlights the loss suffered by five young women who missed their rendezvous with the beloved because they worried about things like lamp oil, when the real point was to be there when the bridegroom arrives. The allegedly wise young women are hardly any better, since they will not share what they have, lest they run out of oil; hardly the attitude we expect in God's kingdom! Distracted by mundane needs, they all have missed the one thing that was important — the coming of the beloved — got distracted, and arrived too late, missing the very union each of them had long desired. As Jesus says to Martha in Luke 10, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her." The noble Martha was, on this occasion, a bit foolish. Do not miss

what you most desire in life merely because you fell asleep or were distracted by all things you want to set right before meeting God.

As for us, waiting upon God even in 2020: at the core of our faith is a deep and intimate love of God, even if we think our faith is about other good things. But such love is a gift, something that happens, a surprise encounter. God comes and goes, but you have to be there wide awake, at just the right moment. You need to not be distracted by unimportant things.

Since I've already alluded to Hindu India, I cannot resist closing with another text from India, a lovely song from Rabindranath Tagore's *Gitanjali* (*Garland of Songs*). This stunningly beautiful book of 103 poem-songs won the Nobel Prize in 1913, a first for a non-Westerner. The whole of it is here for free. The 51st poem ever so lightly echoes Matthew 25:

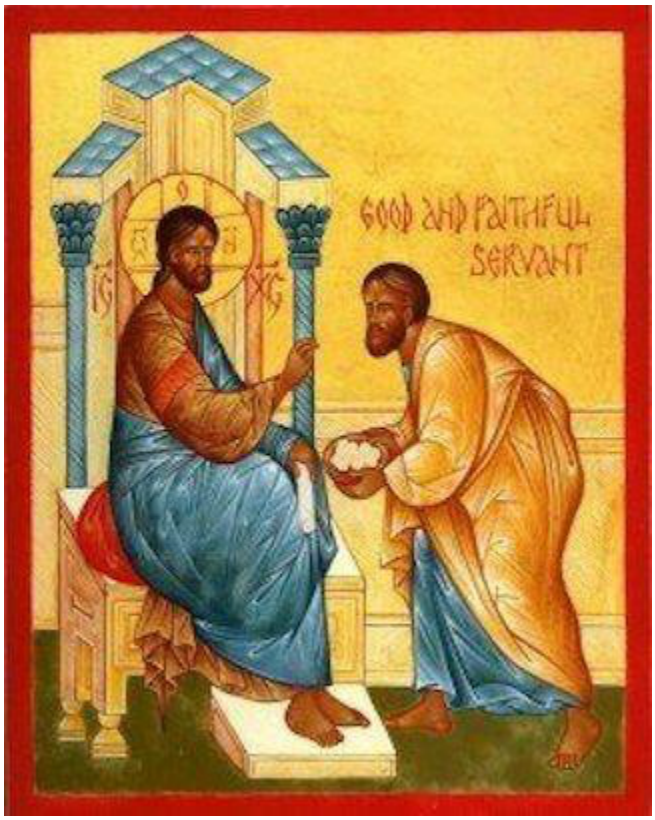
> "The night darkened. Our day's works had been done. We thought that the last guest had arrived for the night and the doors in the village were all shut. Only some said, The king was to come.
>
> We laughed and said "No, it cannot be!" It seemed there were knocks at the door and we said it was nothing but the wind. We put out the lamps and lay down to sleep. Only some said, "It is the messenger!" We laughed and said "No, it must be the wind!"
>
> There came a sound in the dead of the night. We sleepily thought it was the distant thunder. The earth shook, the walls rocked, and it troubled us in our sleep. Only some said, it was the sound of wheels. We said in a drowsy murmur, "No, it must be the rumbling of clouds!" The night was still dark when the drum sounded.
>
> The voice came "Wake up! Delay not! "We pressed our hands on our hearts and shuddered with fear. Some said, "Lo, there is the king's flag!" We stood up on our feet and cried "There is no time for delay!" The king has come but where are lights, where are wreaths? Where is the throne to seat him? Oh, shame! Oh utter shame! Where is the hall, the decorations? Some one has said, "Vain is this cry! Greet him with empty hands, lead him into thy rooms all bare!" Open the doors, let the conch-shells be sounded!
>
> In the depth of the night has come the king of our dark, dreary house. The thunder roars in the sky. The darkness shudders with lightning. Bring out thy tattered piece of mat and spread it in the courtyard. With the storm has come of a sudden our king of the fearful night. (Gitanjali 51)

This changes the dynamic, does it not? Having a house fit for the king is not the issue, just as running out of oil is not the problem. Even if you are not ready, even if you are empty-handed, your home impoverished and your heart bereft of

anything at all, don’t hide, don’t run off, scurrying about to make amends. You are loved just as you are. When the king comes, just open the door as you are right now, and stand there, face to face. Give what you have, offer your simple presence, your empty hands, your expectant heart. That’s enough. Let the king have a seat in your humble home; let the bridegroom dance with all ten young women; let the feasting begin, ready or not.

Your Talents: Waste Them or Use Them, They Are for God's Kingdom

November 13, 2020



Sunday is the 33rd Sunday of the Church's year (November 15). We continue reading Matthew 25: last week, the young women waiting in the night (25.1-13), and next week, the parable of the last judgment (25.31-46), and today, Jesus explains how the kingdom is like the following narrative:

"Again, the kingdom will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his wealth to them. To one he gave five talents, to another two talents, and to another one talent, each according to his ability. (25.14-15)

The setting is straightforward:

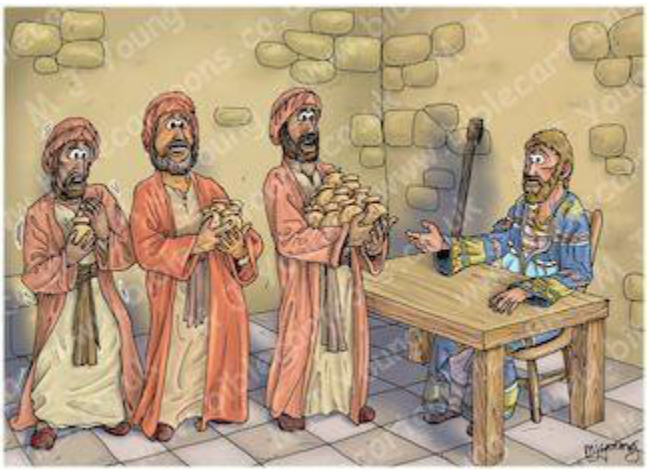
"Then he went on his journey. The servant who had received five talents went at once and put his money to work and gained five talents more. So also, the servant with two talents gained two more. But the servant who had received one talent went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. After a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. (25.15-19)

The rich man's response to the first two servants is exactly the same in each case, since the number of talents was never the issue, only what was done with them:

> "The man who had received five talents brought the other five. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with five talents. See, I have gained five more.' "His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!' The man with two talents also came. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with two talents. See, I have gained two more.' "His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!' (25.20-23)

It is the third servant who is in deep trouble, because he did nothing with what he had been given:

> "Then the man who had received one talent came forward. 'Master,' he said, 'I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. So I was afraid and went out and hid your talent in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.'
>
> His master replied, 'You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest. So take the talent from him and give it to the one who has ten talents. (25.24-28)



Use your God-given talents! Live up to your potential! Be everything you can be! All this might be reduced to good moral advice that we rightly might want to pass down to every new generation. Young people need to realize they have talents, that they should not compare themselves to others with different or more talents, and that must use their talents as best they can.

A solid moral message, but we need to stop and think for a moment. Jesus is in Jerusalem; his conflict with the religious authorities is reaching crisis proportions. After this chapter their plot to have him murdered speeds up, and by the end of the week Jesus will be crucified. So would Jesus really stop here, and offer one final lesson on good behavior, "Use your talents"?

There is a clue in the warning at the end of the parable: "For whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them." And what does that mean? Well, we've heard this before in Matthew, have we not? Think of Matthew 13, where Jesus explains why he speaks directly to his disciples, but indirectly and by parables to the larger gatherings:

> Because the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. Whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them. (13.11-12)

The secrets of the kingdom of heaven, those are the talents Jesus bothers to teach in the last days. That is, those on mission have been given more intimately and directly the secrets of God's kingdom, loving pathways into encounter with God on the way to the kingdom: preaching or sacramental ministry or music ministry or educating or caring for the elderly or the ensuring practical maintenance of a

community's spaces — or whatever else. The gifts are wonderful, but the responsibility is awesome. Then use your gift to continue God's work in the world: invest in the kingdom, for God's sake take a risk!

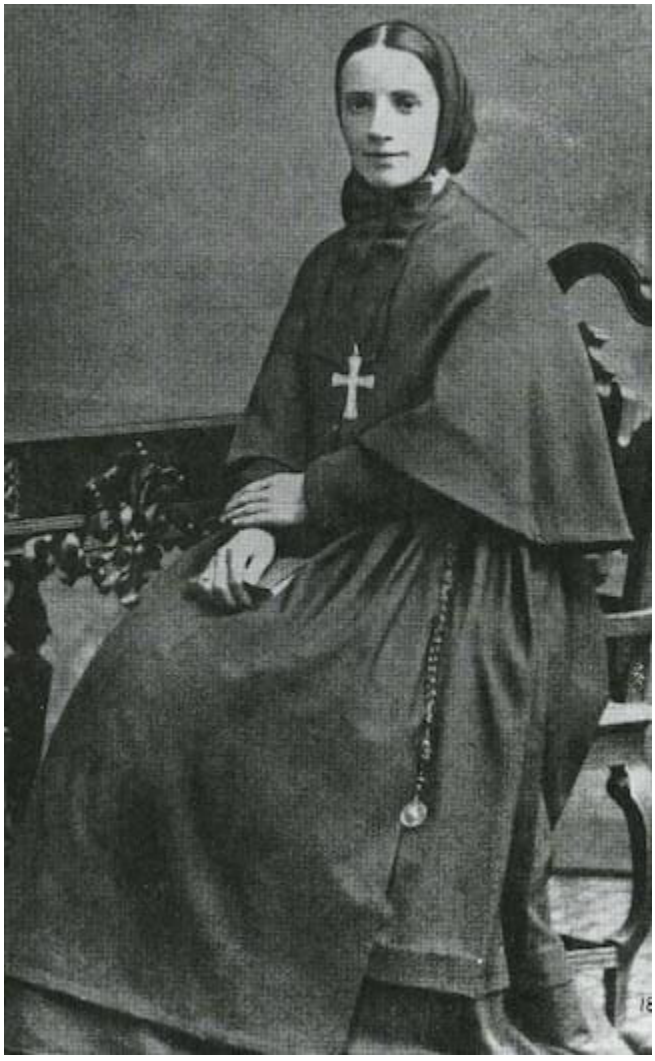
But if you bury your gift and sit on it, or use it only in the most safe and prudent way that avoids all risk, you are just burying God's gifts in the dirt. And if you do that, you lazy servant, you will lose what you've been given — since it was never yours in the first place. The gift of the mystery of the kingdom will be taken from you and given to those who have taken on wholeheartedly the work of the kingdom.

So: not just "use your talents," but "use what has been given to you to do the work God has called you to." This message surely applies to all of us in any community inspired by the admonitions of Jesus, since we all have our vocations and missions in the life of the Church. But since Jesus was speaking most intimately to his closest disciples, it is fair enough to see the sharp edge of the message cutting toward those to whom power and position in the Church have been given.

That is, when we read the text now, we can realize that Jesus is speaking to clergy, priests and deacons, and even more so to bishops and cardinals and popes, as if to say: "I gave it all to you, the mysteries of the Gospel, the keys of my kingdom. Tell me what you did with such gifts? Woe to you if you've hidden my mysteries, kept them just for yourselves, as if I was never coming back!"

There is much more that might be said here — aimed also at myself, for I am priest, clergy, Jesuit, surely accountable for any gifts I have received — but I close with two contrasting examples, the wasting of God's gifts, and the using of God's gifts to the full.

Wasting God's gifts: The "Report on the Holy See's Institutional Knowledge and Decision-Making Related to Former Cardinal Theodore Edgar McCarrick" was released this week on the scandal surrounding Theodore McCarrick, erstwhile Cardinal Archbishop of Washington and leader among leaders in the Church in America. It is a very long report - about 480 pages - but you can get the gist of it here in America magazine. Mr. McCarrick (as the defrocked cleric is now properly called) disgraced himself again and again, using his power to prey on seminarians and clergy beholden to him, even as he kept rising through the ranks. A gifted man, he used his considerable gifts not simply in service of the Kingdom, but far too often in service of himself and a small group of likeminded clerics. And not just him: the report also makes clear the shocking turn-a-blind-eye laziness of those who should have known better, all the way to the very top of the Church, where leaders should have practiced what they preached but did not. Very sad, talents wasted, buried, misspent. The reply should send a chill down every clerical spine:"Throw those worthless servants outside into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth!"



Using God's gifts: By chance, I am finishing this homily on Friday, November 13. This is the feast of Frances Xavier Cabrini (1850-1917). Italian by birth, she worked with the poor and needy, orphans and widows, and gathered a group of women who formed the Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Pope Leo XIII asked her to go to the United States, to work with the Italian immigrant community — the unwanted and marginalized newcomers of the late 19th century, little loved by Americans whose ancestors had arrived in early generations. She worked tirelessly with the poor, eventually dying just before the terrible flu epidemic of 1918 – dying of malaria she caught while working with the poor in the poorest neighborhoods of Chicago. Her work was incredible, beyond all expectations, particularly given the constraints on women in the Church of her time. That is, she was given the gift of care for the poor and needy, and she used this gift to the full, so that it increased a hundred-fold. She is the first United States citizen to be canonized, and she is buried in New York City. Jesus has words for her too:

> "Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!

Our gifts and roles in the Church are for the sake of the kingdom. Let us pray that we be like Mother Cabrini and the countless other women and men who have done what is right, betting everything on the Kingdom, on the Christ who will come again.

(**Notes**: An earlier version of this written text can be heard in this week's recorded Mass. Also, my understanding of the parable of the talents is indebted to an essay by Ben Chenoweth. "Identifying the Talents" which appeared in 2005 in the *Tyndale Bulletin*. Contact me if you'd like more information.)

The Face of the Poor Is the Face of Jesus

November 20, 2020

The last judgment scene in Matthew 25 seems surely to be a perfect Gospel for the “Feast of Christ the King.” The “Son of Man” (a designation for the Messiah and indeed for Jesus himself in his suffering as well as his glory) is in this parable imagined coming in power and glory, the entire human race summoned for a definitive final judgment:

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. (Matthew 25.31-33)

Grand indeed — though remember that the “Last Judgment” is only a parable. It is no more a prediction of the future than the parable of the young women with oil lamps, or the parable of the servants receiving ten talents, five talents, and one talent. Both come right before the third, last judgment parable.

What follows is a quick moving and neatly symmetrical judgment scene, approbation and condemnation taking the same form:

> “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.

These slightly perplexed good people speak freely:

> “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?

They seem to know him, and so they speak with a certain intimacy. Of course we know you; what surprises us is only the implication that we’d unknowingly cared

for you — so magnificent a king on a throne! — amid the endless crowds of poor and needy people around us. But he reassures them:

> “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me. (25.34-40)

The condemnation is exactly parallel — except of course that these people, similarly clueless as to where the King was and what he cared about, seem to have ignored those in need, as if saving their charity for some celebrity moment. Unfortunately, they too get an immediate response:

> “Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.’ (25.41-43)

The dialogue is cut short by judgments passed down with a stark finality that cannot be appealed or bargained down:

> “Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life. (25.46)

Such an ending is harsh — but it is in keeping with the two earlier parables in the chapter: the door is unreasonably slammed in the face of the young women who came late to the wedding feast, and the timid third servant who buried his talent is tossed into the outer darkness. Here in Jerusalem, only several days before the crucifixion, no time is wasted on diplomacy.

As if to drive home the point that God is not what and where we expected, the next scene, opening Matthew 26, begins with Jesus himself tossing aside any tinge of splendor and magnificence:

> “When Jesus had finished saying all these things, he said to his disciples, “As you know, the Passover is two days away—and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified.” (26.1-2)

The same Son of Man, but no throne, no glory, only the cross. The test for the disciples is to learn to “un-see” the scenes of power and magnificence they had been expecting. Not only is Jesus right there in the needy and marginalized — but the real Son of Man — no longer a figure in a parable — is about to join the ranks of criminals, those horribly condemned and killed by the thuggish Roman occupiers

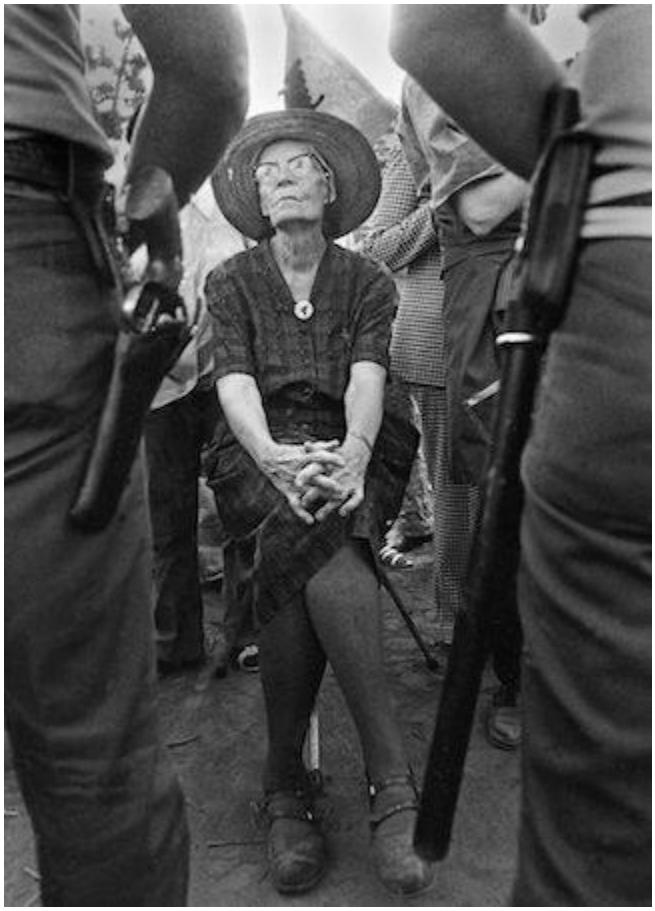
of Israel: "See him on the cross, see him in every condemned person, see him in every criminal on death row."

The key lesson of today's parable is not the duty to feed the poor, or visit the sick and imprisoned. These paramount truths are driven over and over again in the Bible, but they are not the point here. Rather, the lesson of this third parable is that knowing about God, and knowing about those in need, is not enough. Seeing God right there, among and in the needy, is what the kingdom of God is about. Faith is not just piously or righteously waiting for a Son of Man who will come some time later; it is a matter of seeing Jesus here, now. (This too resonates with the earlier two parables: the young women didn't know when he was coming; the three servants had to figure out what to do during his long absence; and here, people find out that he'd never actually gone away.)

Mother Teresa got it right:

“Seeking the face of God in everything, everyone, all the time, and his hand in every happening. This is what it means to be contemplative in the heart of the world. Seeing and adoring the presence of Jesus, especially in the lowly appearance of bread, and in the distressing disguise of the poor. (*In the Heart of the World*)

But closer to home: more often than we realize, the clearest living of the Gospel is already mirrored in the lives of people we already know, in our neighbors. We all know people who quietly and steadfastly work for the needy, visit or befriend people in prison, work for change in our unjust society, give financial help to others when they do not have enough for themselves. These are ordinary people like ourselves who are extraordinary, who really do see the face of Jesus in the face of every person in need. Our Lady of Sorrows parish is blessed with many such saints, including you who read these words!



Quoting Mother Teresa might ordinarily be enough, but I cannot resist adding to the mix another saint of our times, Dorothy Day. After all, she died 40 years ago next week, on November 29, 1980. She was the founder of The Catholic Worker, a lifelong defender of the poor, proponent of nonviolence, a staunch Catholic, a critic of capitalist selfishness, and clear-eyed in the wisdom of seeing Jesus in the face of every person in need. Thus the closing words of her autobiography:

“The most significant thing about The Catholic Worker is poverty, some say. The most significant thing is community, others say. We are not alone anymore. But the final word is love. At times it has been, in the words of Father Zossima [in *The Brothers Karamazov*], a harsh and dreadful thing, and our very faith in love has been tried through fire. We cannot love God unless we love each other, and to love we must know each other. We know him in the breaking of bread, and we are not alone anymore. Heaven is a banquet and life is a banquet, too, even with a crust, where there is companionship. We have all known the long loneliness and we have learned that the only solution is love and that love comes with community."

The vision is not for a special day far in the future, but right now, here:

"It all happened while we sat there talking, and it is still going on." (*The Long Loneliness*)

On the feast of Christ the King, at Thanksgiving during this pandemic year, at next week’s dawning of Advent, let us take to heart this simple truth: when we meet someone in need, it is Jesus himself who is needing us. Today, not tomorrow, is judgment day.

You're invited: The Dorothy Day Guild is hosting a national program marking the 40th anniversary of Dorothy Day's death on November 29 at 6pm. David Brooks, Anne Snyder, and Paul Elie will speak. The event is online and free, but you need to register here.

How Shall We Wait for God This Advent?

November 27, 2020

Today, Sunday November 29, is the first Sunday of Advent, and so we enter upon the new Church year. It is still 2020, but we are surely justified a sigh of relief as we look ahead to new beginnings, new hope. Covid 19 began to make a devastating difference in our lives back in March, early in Lent. Then we (some of us only minimally distressed, other devastated in ongoing ways) walked and suffered our way through the rest of Lent, and then the whole of the Easter season concluding at Pentecost, and then the many weeks of "ordinary time" (in a most un-ordinary year) that culminated last week with the feast of Christ the King. But now once more we await in hope the Christ who once more arrives in our darkness.

For many of us, Advent is the most beautiful season in the year, four weeks of watching and waiting for God. But at the beginning of this season we need to ask ourselves: what kind of waiting do we have in mind? We have options, depending on our state of heart and mind this time around. I suggest three of these options: anxious waiting; argumentative waiting; serene waiting.

First, we can wait anxiously. Today's passage from the Gospel according to Mark does not offer a perfectly serene moment of contemplative waiting. Rather, Mark 13 seems to highlight a rather exhausting waiting, on high alert, a bit anxious:

> "But about the day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come. It's like a man going away. He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with their assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch. Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back—whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn. If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. What I say to you, I say to everyone: 'Watch!'" (Mark 13.32-37)

So many things can cause delay, things can go wrong. Perhaps he may delay or change his mind and not come at all. And who knows what she will say and do when she arrives? He might be in a mood we might find consoling or terrifying. Waiting is important, but watching and waiting without certainty is hard. We may fall asleep and miss the great arrival. Like the young women in Matthew 25 (a few weeks ago), we may start fussing over details, burn out, running out of oil for our lamps, and miss God's arrival altogether. Advent might indeed be a hard season for some of us this year, before a harder Christmas. The first thing is to be honest about where we are this time around.

A second kind of waiting is a bit more dramatic, even melodramatic — as if we shake our fist at the heavens and tell God to hurry up. This mood is evoked vividly in our first reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, Chapters 63-64. (Read the whole of this prophecy if you can, 63.7 all the way to the end of 64.) The prophet knows well who God is and what God has done — but now the question is, *where* is this God?

> "Where is he who brought them through the sea, with the shepherd of his flock?
>
> Where is he who set his Holy Spirit among them, who sent his glorious arm of power to be at Moses' right hand?
>
> Where is he who divided the waters before them, to gain for himself everlasting renown?
>
> Where is he who led them through the depths? (63.11-13)

The basic plea is not subtle at all, and has grandeur to it:

> "Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would melt before you! (64.1)

But there is a complaint woven into the prophecy. Isaiah feels obliged to remind God of how present and active God was — *in the past*:

> "When you did awesome things that we did not expect, you came down, and the mountains trembled before you. Since ancient times no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who acts on behalf of those who wait for him. (64.3-4)

That's what God is like, what God has done — in the past. But what about now? “We don’t need you, O Lord, just when we are good — we need you when we are bad, when the world is a total mess (like right now)!”

> "You come to the help of those who gladly do right, who remember your ways. But when we continued to sin, you were angry. How then can we be saved? (64.5)

Near the end of the long argument with God, full responsibility is decisively thrown onto God:

> "Yet you, Lord, are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter. We are all the work of your hand. Do not be angry beyond measure, Lord. Do not remember our sins forever. Oh, look upon us we pray, for we are all your people. (64.8-9)

As if to say: it is your fault, O Lord, if we keep messing things up. You are the creator, you made us as we are. Remember how you formed us out of the clay of the earth (Genesis 2)? It is up to you to mold us, fix us, make the world go right. Come down now!

Try it — complaining to God might be a refreshing way to begin Advent.

Or maybe we are just tired, and really do want this Advent to be a season of very quiet waiting. So there is a third way: simple waiting — patient, quiet, wordless, unworried. This kind of waiting for God is like waiting for the sun to rise. The Psalms have a number of beautiful passages with this theme:

> "God is within her, she will not fail: God will help her at break of day. (Psalm 46.5)
>
> Even in darkness light dawns for the upright, for those who are gracious and compassionate and righteous.
> Good will come to those who are generous and lend freely, who conduct their affairs with justice. (112.4-5)
>
> I call out to you: save me and I will keep your statutes! I rise before dawn and cry for help. I have put my hope in your word. My eyes stay open through the watches of the night, that I may meditate on your promises. (119.146-148)

Or, to use another image, consider the Gospel read at daily Mass the other day, Friday of this past week:

"Look at the fig tree and all the trees.When they sprout leaves, you can see for yourselves and know that summer is near. Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that the kingdom of God is near. (Luke 21.29-31)

Even in the dead of winter, keep an eye on the trees; watch the seemingly barren branches; watch and you will see: eventually new buds and leaves and flowers will spring from branches that seemed to have no life in them. 2020 has been a longer wintry season, more death than life. But watch: God is coming again, the sun is rising. Spring too will come, life will return.

So how will we watch and wait during Advent 2020? Take a deep breath, even on this question, go slowly. There is lot's of time in Advent if you don't rush it. Take the first week of Advent to figure out for yourself how you will wait — anxiously or argumentatively or serenely — in Advent, 2020. (Or maybe a little of each...)

Here are some hymns to listen to. Two versions of Taize's *Wait for the Lord*, a first and a second. Or try Dan Schutte's A Time Will Come for Singing. And, of course, there is always the very familiar O Come, O Come, Emmanuel

(An earlier version of this written homily can be found in the recorded Mass for this Sunday.)

In the Beginning: John in the Desert

December 4, 2020

Who are we waiting for in Advent?

This is surely an odd question, you may be thinking, since we surely know that we are waiting for the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. More than any other image but the crucifixion, the images of the birth of Christ are so familiar we take them for granted: Bethlehem, shepherds, angels, mother and child…

Yet these images were not always taken for granted. St. Paul, the first writer in the New Testament, refers to the birth of Jesus only in the vaguest sense without dwelling on the fact. But more relevant to this moment, the 2nd Sunday of Advent, is the fact that St. Mark, the first of the Gospel-writers, does not mention the birth of Jesus at all. In his Gospel, St. John may take it for granted that readers know the Christmas stories told in Matthew and Luke. But Mark comes first, takes nothing for granted, and starts right in the middle of things:

> "The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God. (Mark 1.1)

To appreciate Mark, we need for a moment to un-learn what we know by heart about the birth of Jesus, that we may watch and wait differently, eyes on the desert whence a new voice will be heard, a voice which Mark takes to have been predicted by the prophet Malachi,

> "I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the Lord Almighty. (Malachi 3.1)

And so too the prophet Isaiah, as we hear in today's first reading,

> "A voice of one calling:
> 'In the desert prepare the way for the Lord;
> make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
> Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low;
> the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain.
> And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all people will see it together.
> For the mouth of the Lord has spoken. (Isaiah 40.3-5)

Mark combines the quotes, a little of each:

> “As it is written in Isaiah the prophet: ‘I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way, a voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’ (1.2-3)

And who is this messenger? None but the unforgettable figure of John, perhaps the oddest person in the Gospels, the man from nowhere:

> “And so John the Baptist appeared in the desert… John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. (1.4a, 6)

This is one of the great and unforgettable images in the Bible, the man of the desert, raw and wild, living off the land, half-naked and, we can imagine, ascetic and gaunt. He is no man of the city, no priest or temple official, no good citizen of the community. (Luke of course tells a different story, later on, but forget that too for now). John has no credentials at all, nothing on his side but the fact that he is a messenger from God, racing to prepare the way for the Messiah who is to come. He is nothing but that voice crying in the desert, a pure sounding of God's Word in human words, simple, clear, uncluttered by the culture or even the religion of the city. Yet he is also someone not to be forgotten: later on in Mark, people twice speculate: perhaps Jesus is John come back to us after his death? (6.14, 8.28) In next week's Gospel, from John 1, the point is asserted over and over, because people had to be convinced: John is not the Messiah — despite what many of you think.

Once arrived, John offers a message that is rather simple, but wildly successful:

> “He came preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. (4b-5)

Repentance, forgiveness, purification — in Advent? We rightly insist that Advent is not the same as Lent, even if priests wear the same purple vestments. We rightly say that Advent is about hope, expectation, waiting, while Lent is the time of repentance and purification. All that is clear. But Mark seems not to know all that. When the Messiah is coming, Mark tells us, confess your sins, be plunged into the waters of the Jordan, become clean again — and in that way the Story begins.

But in all this, most powerful are the only words of John quoted by Mark:

> “After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. (1.7)

John is gathering large crowds, people attracted to his uncompromisingly simple, spare voice; he is a person who is nothing like anyone they’ve known before. The men of power in the city, the religious and political elites, are surely uneasy, uncertain what this strange visitor from the desert might do next. But John is not uncertain. After all those years in the desert he has humbled his pride, slain his ego, stripped away all that is superfluous, and emptied himself. God’s wide road runs right through him, and that is why he can promise, there is One coming after me, and he will get inside you, he will plunge you into the Spirit of God:

> “I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit. (1.8)

Thus Mark’s telling of the beginning of the Good News, a very different Advent story. You will not see this scene on Christmas cards, but we need to close our eyes and see it. And better, we need to hear John, learning who he is and who he is not — who we are and who we are not.

You and I are unlikely to be a John the Baptist. But if we can be a bit like Jesus, surely we can be a little more like John by the time Advent is over: simpler, quieter, steeped in the silence of that desert where God speaks directly to our hearts; living not off the stuff we save up for ourselves, but only by the small gifts God gives us, locusts and wild honey sufficient unto the day; speaking not because we love to hear the sound of our own voice, but because we are a little more ready to say to people yearning for God: I am not the one you seek — hear and look right through me — the Lord is near, about to arrive.

Indeed, Jesus was already there at the Jordan, watching John, listening to John.

The Beginningless Word - Is Right Here

December 11, 2020

Last week, on Advent's second Sunday, we heard the opening of the Gospel according to Mark. There we saw not the usual nativity scene, but only a stark presentation of John the Baptist coming in from the desert, preaching the kingdom, baptizing in the Jordan river. This week, on the Third Sunday of Advent (December 13), the evangelist John, writing after Matthew and Luke, like Mark leaves aside the Bethlehem story. Here too we meet John the Baptist as the key figure at the beginning of the ministry of Jesus. His arrival was the spark that ignited the great revelation of the coming of the Christ. You cannot really understand the coming of the Christ if you neglect the role of John.

The evangelist tells the story of John with a certain simplicity and elegance:

> "There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light… John testified concerning that light. He cried out, saying, "This is the one I spoke about when I said, 'He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.'" (1.6-8, 15)

But he is something of a mystery, and skeptics come to pester him with questions, which he keeps answering in simple clear terms:

> "Now this was John's testimony when the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, "I am not the Messiah." They asked him, "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" He answered, "No." Finally they said, "Then who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, "I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'"

Others try again:

> "Then the Pharisees who had been sent questioned him, "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" "I baptize with water," John replied, "but among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie." (1.19-27)

But there is more. As we all know, Matthew and Luke supplement Mark's simple account with the back story of the birth of Jesus at Bethlehem (and even the

Annunciation to Mary in Luke, and Joseph's dream about Mary's pregnancy in Matthew). John too has a story to tell, but his is much older still, going back to the beginning of all things:

> "In the Beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the Beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. (1.1-5)

That eternal original light, the Word and original Wisdom, now illumines this world and all that is in it:

> "The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God — children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God. (1.9-14)

This Word, this Light, comes to stay among us, the God who cannot be seen now seen among us:

> "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth… Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known. (1.14, 16-18)

All of this is very grand. Indeed, it is hard to think of any vision of Christ in the Bible more splendid than this. But the evangelist has a larger plan. By weaving together the narrative about John and the narrative of the Word made flesh, he is placing John the Baptist in the context of God's greatest plan, the great arc of history from the Beginning of all things to the moment when John came out of the desert. And he is reminding us that the eternal Word has to be received and recognized by an intense and simple man of the desert, the man named John, who has been waiting for just this impossible arrival of God in human flesh:

> "This all happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptizing. The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is the one I meant when I said, 'A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.' I myself did not know him, but the reason I

came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel." Then John gave this testimony: "I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. And I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.' I have seen and I testify that this is God's Chosen One."(1.28-34)

Thus the true meaning of Christmas as the Gospel according to John sees it: the eternal Word — coming down to dwell among us, on a particular day, in a particular place — with no fanfare or angels or stars or visions — simply there to be seen by John — a man from the desert who lives every day with his eyes open to the Spirit of God at work in the world: that's it, that is the chemistry of the coming of the Messiah. What else is needed?

One more thing is needed, it turns out, because the real point is even simpler, more immediate, closer up:

"The next day John was there again with two of his disciples. When he saw Jesus passing by, he said, "Look, the Lamb of God!" When the two disciples heard him say this, they followed Jesus. Turning around, Jesus saw them following and asked, "What do you want?" They said, "Rabbi, where are you staying?" "Come and see." So they went and saw where he was staying. They spent that day with him. It was about four in the afternoon. (1.35-39)

That is to say: the eternal Word, who was there in the Beginning, in whom the world was created, who is the Light in the darkness, the long awaited Messiah — happens to be right over there, about six feet from you, walking by right now. Look! There he is! And it turns out that he lives just a few minutes walk from here...

Thus begins the rest of the story of the Word in the world, Jesus and his disciples beginning to gather, simply because one person — John — points Jesus out to Andrew and a few others and then steps out of the way. Jesus responds in the most ordinary, non-Messianic, neighborly way: come over, spend the afternoon where I live. Let's break bread together, have a glass of wine.

This is where we come in. We were not with John in the desert; we were not there at the Jordan, to be baptized by him; we were not there in Bethlehem to see Mary and Joseph and the baby; and we certainly were not there in the Beginning, when the Word was with God before all else.

But what matters is that we are here and now. That is enough, for this is where we meet God. We are here in December 2020 amid a devastating pandemic, in an

environmentally degraded world, amid systemic injustices old and new. I look like this, you look like that; I am a man, you are woman; I am old, you are young. But whoever and however we are, Jesus happens to live nearby, just a few streets away. Come and see.

It's really very easy, the evangelist is telling us. At the start, you need a Baptist, just arrived from the desert, to point out Jesus. But the rest is up to you. Let us accept the invitation, visit Jesus in the middle of this barren winter, and spend some time with him, a few hours that add up to an eternity. Let us too be like John the Baptist, helping others in their search for God, pointing to the Light as best we can, then getting out of the way, that God might speak to every individual in her own way. What could make for a better Christmas?

Look, says John.

Come and see, says Jesus.

See for yourself, we say to one another.

(An earlier "live" version of this homily can be found in the recorded Mass for this weekend, here.)

Gathering Again the Family of God, Generation by Generation

December 18, 2020

We may be tempted to think of December 25 as THE day, the day God is born in our midst. We may be tempted to think of it as a one time magnificent act, God changing everything that day in Bethlehem. Think again: God is born among us once, then, but this is a living reality, God becoming flesh and blood over a thousand generations, God not merely a visitor, but God here to stay, in all the perfections and messiness of our families as they are in every generation. Consider each of the readings we hear on this 4th Sunday of Advent.

In I Samuel 7, David wants to build a fine temple for God. The logic is plausible: David is now a great king, living in a palace; should he not thank God by building a fine temple, a home for God? But the prophet Nathan receives a message from God that turns things upside down, as God has plans for David:

> "Go and tell my servant David, 'This is what the Lord says: Who are you to build me a house to dwell in? I have not dwelt in a house from the day I brought the Israelites up out of Egypt to this day. I have been moving from place to place with a tent as my dwelling. Wherever I have moved with all the Israelites, did I ever say to any of their rulers whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, "Why have you not built me a house of cedar?" (2 Samuel 7.5-7)

Rather,

> "The Lord declares to you that the Lord himself will establish a house for you. When your days are over and you rest with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, your own flesh and blood, and I will establish their kingdom. (7.11-12)

David's own kingly family does continue for a while, with good kings and bad, triumphs and disasters, and Jesus is of that lineage. But God's plan has an even longer reach, building for David a family that comes fully alive at the Nativity, and from that day on to flourish in good times and bad down through the centuries, person by person, family by family, communities large and small in all their virtues and sins, fears and loves.

And so we turn from David to Mary. Today's Gospel is the very well-known story of the Annunciation, the story of God continuing the lineage of David, now in this young woman. Mary is drawn into God's great plan by surprise. She is simply a young woman of child-bearing age. She has no life plan yet, as far as we know from the little Luke says. She is not even like John the Baptist, who for whatever reason had already been living in the desert, waiting for the Word of God that comes to him. Mary seems to be minding her own business, seeming to await the day of her marriage. And so it is that she is surprised by God when Gabriel, that great and solemn messenger, comes to her and announces the grand plan in which she is now to play a surprisingly large part:

> "But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end." (Luke 1.30-33)

Mary listens, and then very simply asks how this might come about. She is not even married yet, only engaged to Joseph, and so is not about to have a child, any child, much less the Son of God. It is all quite impossible — so what exactly does God intend? Gabriel responds with a remarkable promise of what the Spirit will do, and what God will do even for Mary's cousin Elizabeth (as the family immediately grows):

> "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Elizabeth your cousin is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail. (1.35-37)

Hearing all this, Mary simply consents:

> "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." (1.38)

And so God's entire plan moves forward, the Son of God now become a son in the lineage of David, son of Joseph, son of Mary. This is a new beginning in the great story of God dwelling among us, but not its end. Salvation is, after all, the story of a thousand generations.

Of course: Jesus did not marry and did not have children, and so his heritage is of a different kind, the family of those who hear him and follow him. Luke explains this later on:

> "Then his mother and his brothers and sisters came to him, but they could not reach him because of the crowd. He was told, "Your mother and your brothers and sisters are standing outside, wanting to see you." But he told them, "My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it." (8.19-20)

And so it is that many more generations, ourselves included, end up being the family of Jesus, the descendants of David, descendants of Mary and Joseph.

And finally, there is our second reading, the very last lines of St. Paul's great Letter to the Romans, dedicated to the good news:

> "The revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, only now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God — that all the Gentiles might come to the obedience that comes of faith. (Romans 16.25-26)

All the Gentiles, everybody, whoever, wherever: God dwelling among us, Jesus still always and first of all a son of Israel, but now gathering a larger and more inclusive family from which no one need be excluded.

In our pandemic world at this difficult Christmas, our task then is to be like David, to let God build a home for us; like Mary, who says yes in a remarkably simple way, and then takes on every duty and all the worries of raising her son; and like Paul, who sees that this community has no limits, near or far, now or in the future. In the cold and dark days of December 2020 this means that we need to tell the whole story again in our own words, in every home and in every family, making sense of God's promises for ourselves — but also for those who come after us in God's ever widening family on earth.

(The second image above is a painting of the Annunciation by the famed Indian artist, Jyoti Sahi.)

Taste and See, the Lord Is Born Today

December 23, 2020

Advent has been filled with beautiful readings, day by day, and each Sunday, the scene has progressively prepared us for the coming of the Messiah, Jesus who has come and yet comes again in 2020. We have meditated with John the Baptist many times over, and just a few days ago on the 4th Sunday of Advent, we pondered Gabriel's visit to Mary and her simple assent to God's plan. And now there is even more: if we add together the Vigil of Christmas and the three Christmas Masses (Midnight, Dawn, Day), we have at least a dozen of Bible, New Testament, and Gospel passages that are intended to get us to meditate in more depth on the meaning of this familiar feast, a feast we should never take for granted. You can find them here, by each time and day.

Yet the most familiar and powerful reading that stays with us most easily and perhaps most deeply is Luke 2.1-20: here we are drawn into the mystery of Christmas as a vividly experiential scene; by Luke's words we come to see the birth of Jesus as if occurring before our very eyes. This is so in part because it is only Luke who actually describes for us the night Christ was born. Yes, of course, Matthew knows of the birth of Jesus, but by comparison with Luke, what he tells us about the birth of Jesus is minimal: "Joseph did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus." (Matthew 1.24-25) He does, in the next chapter, recount the visit of the magi, which will be Gospel for Epiphany, January 3. On the whole, Matthew's account stands as a kind of supplement to Luke's richly detailed narrative. Let's put aside the notion that we know it perfectly even without reading it, and take it up step by step.

First, the birth of Jesus happens in a certain geo-political moment, and a bad one at that, as the Roman oppressors decide to count up their subjects:

> "In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register. Luke 2.1-3)

This oppressive situation requires arduous travel from one place to another, the

approximately 90 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem, all the worse because it is very late in Mary's pregnancy:

> "Joseph too went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. (2.4-5)

The circumstances are dire — in an unfamiliar place, at night, no place to stay, and then Mary's time of delivery inconveniently comes due:

> "While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them at the inn. (2.6-7)

And thus it was that Jesus was born, as it were in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Our problem today is not an oppressive Caesar or a wicked Herod, but Covid and our pathetic response to this health crisis, plus an array of other evils that do not go away, ranging from systemic racism to an inadequate political class to the degradation of the climate, and disregard for the lives of the unborn and the living. And where are today's Mary, Joseph, and the baby? Not in the safety of a church Nativity scene, nor in the best of hospitals nor among a caring, loving extended family, but somewhere else, amid hardship and poverty: perhaps a young couple finding themselves homeless because of jobs due to Covid? perhaps among persecuted minorities fleeing China or Myanmar or Guatemala? refugees at the border, or migrants attempting to cross the Mediterranean and enter Europe? Pick a bad situation where people are in distress: Jesus will be born there.

Luke seems to suggest that no one else was in that stable at the time of the birth of Jesus. They were alone. But immediately thereafter the word began to spread, first of all by heavenly messengers sent to shepherds:

> "And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests." (2.8-14)

When the shepherds hear the good news, presumably they are both shocked at the appearing of angels, and full of joy at what seems to be good news, perhaps beyond anything they were expecting.

We too can listen to the same words spoken once by the angels, Christ born in Bethlehen and born in our midst on this Christmas Day, 2020, a great joy to those with no joy then and now. Today's angels may include those people who bring us the Good News by their words of truth, of hope in the darkness, of comfort amid sorrow, and by the example of how they live out the love of God and love of

neighbor in the things they do. We can listen to our sisters and brothers who speak with angelic voices; we can try at least to share in the simple prayer that is joy, glorifying this God who is greater than we can imagine, yet also just a baby in the manger.

The chapter might end there; whether anything more happens is up to the shepherds. They might have been content with the heavenly word they received, asking for nothing more, simply returning to their night watch. Anyway — what is this sign of which the angels spoke? One more poor infant born of homeless parents, in one more dirty stable? Leave the sheep unattended just to see that?

But they do decide to act:

> "When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.” So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. (2.15-16)

The shepherds become, we can say, readers of ordinary signs that speak of divine realities. When they saw the baby, they saw the Messiah. Amid the ordinary and the dismal and the impoverished, they glimpsed the fulfillment of God’s promises.

An aside: It is here that another taken-for-granted part of the Christmas season comes into play, to help us in our journey to seeing Jesus. We have an 800 year tradition of representing and visualizing Christmas by the creche, the Christmas crib with its surrounding figures.

St. Francis of Assisi may be the one who had the first crib scene set up, with the clear purpose in mind, that people come to see and hear and taste this mystery central to our faith. The whole story is here, in summary form. See also the original here, told by Thomas of Celano. As the summary goes, Francis said,

> *"I want to enact the memory of the infant* who was born at Bethlehem and how he was bedded in the manger on hay between a donkey and an ox. *I want to see all of this with my own eyes."*

Francis is said to have preached with deep sentiment and fervor to the crowd gathered around that first crib:

"The saint of God stood before the manger, uttering sighs, overcome with love and filled with a wonderful happiness He sang the Gospel in a sonorous voice, a clear and sonorous voice, inviting all to the highest rewards. Then he preached to the people standing about and spoke charming words concerning the birth of the poor King, and the little town of Bethlehem When he spoke the name 'Child of Bethlehem' or 'Jesus,' *his tongue licked his lips, relishing and savoring with pleased palate the sweetness of the words*."

The genius of Francis was to make the scene visible, palpable, right here to be visited by anybody.

When we visualize the Nativity today, helped along by paintings and sculptures, Christmas cards and crib scenes, we are awakening our spiritual senses, the eyes of our soul, ears and tongue, touch and scent able to encounter God in our own flesh and blood, and not by simply thinking about all this. This is what the shepherds did, and with our eyes open or closed, with them and St. Francis we can see the same reality today.

Indeed, Luke himself is gently urging upon us the same contemplative theme, a Christmas that is still, quiet, a matter of coming to see God here and now. After all, Mary herself, so central to the scene, shows us what to do, how to be quiet and to contemplate Christ born among us:

"Mary treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart. (2.19)

Here is an invitation, so appropriate to our enforced stay-at-home moment, to stop and be quiet, closing our eyes and pondering all of it in our hearts: 2020, Covid; the disruptions and losses rending our society; eruptions of violence in our cities; the shuttering of our parishes; the awakening that has been happening, we hope, in these weeks of Advent; John the Baptist, angels and shepherds; the angel Gabriel coming to visit Mary; and at the heart of it all, this homeless couple huddled in a barn, their new-born baby in a rough bin where sheep and cows are

accustomed to eat. All this we can ponder in our hearts on this most quiet Christmas day.

Now all this may seem fanciful, even a bit too pious amid crises that demand action. But it is not so. By pondering deeply, savoring, being touched to the core, we become more fully alive, better able to stand up and speak and act. It is those who see, and ponder what they see, that will have something to say, compassion and love manifest in their deeds.

This after all is Luke's final point. Ordinary men and women, the shepherds suddenly found their voice and their courage, and with great effectiveness spread the news, as the first preachers of the newborn Christ:

> "When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them… The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told. (2.17-18, 20)

We are no less qualified for this than the shepherds, if for a moment we have put aside our doubts, getting up and finding our way to the Christ born in the world of 2020 — as it is, and not a better world somewhere else. We too can give our own simple witness in our own words to the Lord born this year, of all years.

(I will not post a homily for Sunday, December 27. But since that date is the Feast of the Holy Family, you can tell your own story of what it means for a family to be holy! My next one will be for Epiphany, January 3, 2021.)

The Magi Find the Newborn Christ (Despite Everything Else)

January 1, 2021

Christmas is a really simple feast: God born among us, for us to see and hear,

taste and touch and smell. Yet when we actually read the Gospels it quickly gets complicated — and, I think, more relevant to our not-so-simple world today.

Mark and John do not speak of the birth of Jesus. The feast is most vividly imagined in Luke's account of the birth of Jesus, and rightly so. When we "see" the Nativity, we are usually "seeing" Luke's version of it, and that is very good indeed. Matthew's telling of the birth of the child is, as I mentioned last week, minimal:

> "When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus. (Matthew 1.24-25)

Yes, Matthew gives us a few wonderful details, most notably the star and the Magi, wise men from the East. It seems easy enough to add those details of Matthew 2 to the Lukan account, as easy as adding the figures of the Magi to a Nativity scene, alongside the shepherds, sheep and oxen, and the angel above. Their star of course looks very nice, just above the stable. And as a bonus, if we allow the visit of the Magi to stand on its own, Herod is pushed off the stage — we never see a Herod figure in a Nativity scene! — while the desperate escape to Egypt and the awful massacre of the children are shuffled off to a separate feast on December 28.

But the price of fitting Matthew into Luke's scene and sidelining the darker parts of his story is to lose sight of the hard-edged, and challenging message Matthew is giving us in his second chapter: the light shines in the darkest of times; human weakness, failure, and evil do not thwart God's intention to dwell among us. Let us look at the dark part of this chapter, and then see how the light shines all the brighter.

Matthew's Magi enter the scene only after a long journey that takes a long time — a year or more? — arriving well after the actual birth of Jesus. Reasonably enough, expecting a royal child, they approach king Herod and ask him about the whereabouts of this child. They do not know that Herod is a wicked king, working hand in hand with the Roman oppressors and clinging to power. So he is disturbed even to hear of a possible rival:

> "After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." *When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.* (2.1-3)

Herod sends them away, and consults with his advisors:

> "When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: 'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.' (2.4-6)

He talks again to the Magi, and sends them on their way to Bethlehem (though for some reason he does not simply have them followed!):

> "Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. (2.7-8)

The story does not end well. The Magi, warned in a dream, sneak off (camels and all) into the desert by another route, while Joseph, similarly warned in a dream, takes Mary and Jesus and flees to Egypt, hundreds of miles away:

> "When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. “Get up,” he said, “take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.” So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: “Out of Egypt I called my son.” (Hosea 11.1) (2.13-15)

And then, in the truly horrid sequel — no “all is calm, all is bright” that night — Herod murders all the boys of the age that the child Jesus would by now have reached:

> "When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. (2.16)

Even at chapter’s end, lingering fear explains why the family ended up in Nazareth:

> "So Joseph (instructed by an angel) got up, took the child and his mother and returned to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Having been warned by another dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee, and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. (2.21-23)

How dark a Nativity scene Matthew 2 gives us!

OK, you may say, but on this Sunday, January 3, 2021, we celebrate *the great and happy feast* of the Epiphany, the shining of the light of Christ in the world. For many Christians in the Churches of the East, this is the real Christmas (and of course is properly celebrated only on January 6). It celebrates the light of Christ shining now even for those among us — almost all of us — who are not lucky enough to be Jewish. So there really is good news shining out amid the bad news.

Who were the Magi? There are options:

> Magi: the name given by the Babylonians, Medes, Persians, and others, to those wise teachers, priests, physicians, astrologers, seers, interpreters of dreams, augers, soothsayers, sorcerers etc.;
>
> Or: false prophets and sorcerers;
>
> Or: the oriental wise men who, having discovered by the rising of a remarkable star that the Messiah had just been born, came to Jerusalem to worship him (adapted from the online Theological Dictionary of the New Testament)

Magic has a bad name in the Bible, and so too the reading of the stars. But Matthew is not worried about all that. He introduces Magi without accusing them of anything, and indeed without explaining what “magi” are, since he is interested in what happens when someone who is not like us, not known and approved in advance, comes from far off to meet the young Jesus.

After the Magi leave Herod’s palace, they find what they have been looking for:

> "After they had heard the king, the Magi went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. *When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.*

Overcome with joy, they enter the house (not "stable") where the family is living; they see, and they worship:

> "On coming to the house, *they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they prostrate themselves and worshiped him.*

And, in an echo of the universal scene unfolded in today's first reading from Isaiah 60, they give their exotic gifts:

> "Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. (2.9-11)

What is striking — beyond the fact that they could find the young Jesus and his mother at all, based on reading stars — is that Matthew really is neutral: they are Magi; they come a considerable way to see the child, when most local people remained clueless or suspicious; they find the child; and afterwards they go home. But how long did they spend with Jesus, Mary and Joseph? An hour? A few days?

We might want to think that their lives are greatly changed by the encounter, but Matthew does not say. All we are told are the basics: the Magi were wise, they saw the Christ, they rejoiced with a great joy, they saw and they worshipped, they gave what they had to give, and they returned home.

So, inside the gloomy second chapter of the Gospel, we have this wonderful instance of encounter with Christ — and his mother — that fulfills the hopes that instigated a long and fanciful journey in search of a new-born king. Particularly within the frame of uncertainty, dishonesty, danger and violence surrounding it, the simplicity of the moment of vision, joy, and worship is all the more powerful — which is why we must read *all* of Matthew 2, not just the parts we like at Christmas time.

Even if Matthew 28, the end of the Gospel, gives us what is known as the great missionary command — "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit..." (28.19) — Matthew 2 ought not be forgotten or reduced to a Christmas ornament. Rather, lighten up: let Christ be seen in life, in scripture, in the stars and amid all the signs that nature gives us, let him be found by anyone who cares enough to leave home

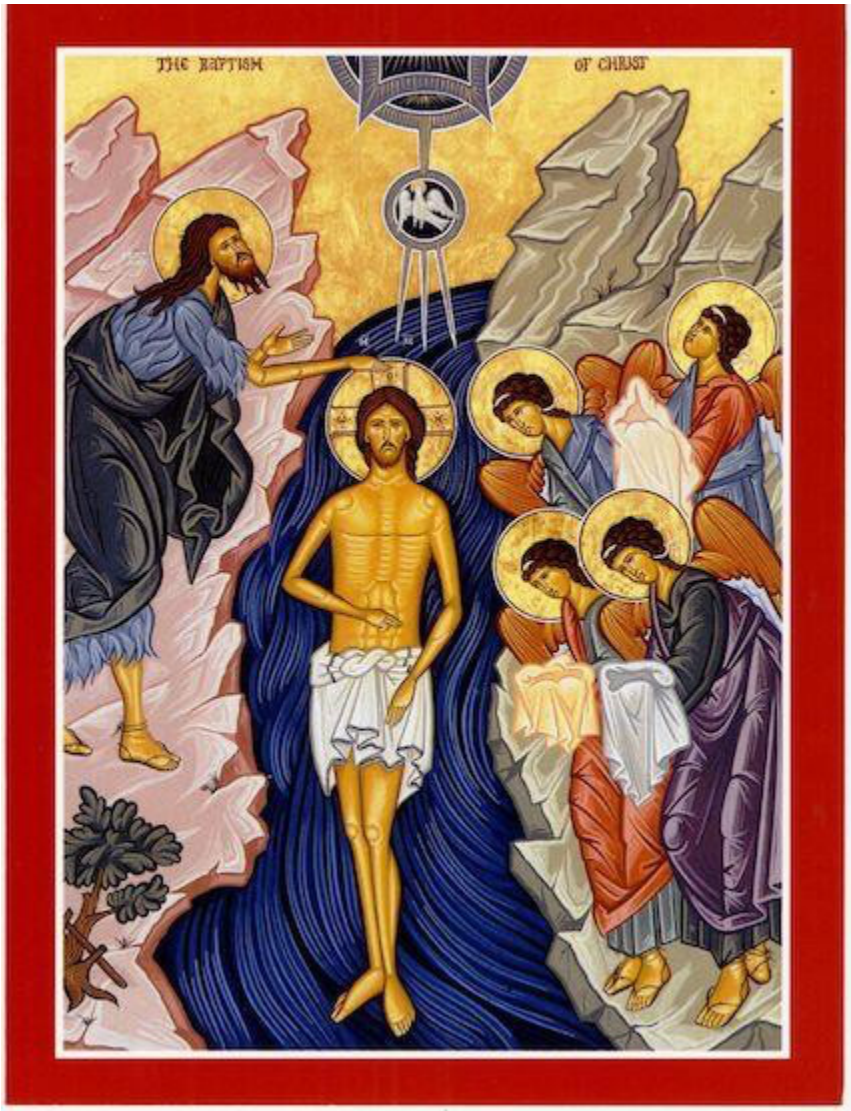
and cross many deserts to find him, getting into trouble and risking everything along the way; let the encounter with Jesus bring joy to everyone who finds him, worships him, even if they do not stay with us, since they have to go home again...

The light of Christ is for all, and it is free: it is Epiphany.

A little more: There are of course other ways to ponder the Magi, in whose story we have tended to read our own life stories. You will enjoy this beautiful setting of the familiar "We Three Kings", sung by the King's Choir, Cambridge UK. The famed poet **T.S. Eliot** wrote the dark and brooding "Journey of the Magi" (which he reads here), pondering whether the Magi's visit might have actually ruined their lives, taking the old without giving any new certitudes. **Dorothy Sayers**, the witty British novelist and cultural critic, wrote "The Three Kings," a poem that sees the three Magi as marking how we meet Christ in our youth, in middle age, and in old age; you can hear it sung here in the setting by Jonathan Dove here. And finally, you will want to read (or read again) **Henry van Dyke's** "The Other Wise Man," a short story about the Magus who never made it to Bethlehem — but then kept finding Jesus everywhere else in the course of his life.

At the Baptism, Like a Dove That Hovers Over the Beloved

January 8, 2021



The Baptism of the Lord, this year on January 10, marks formally the end of the Christmas season. As such, it is a sensible transition point to the Church calendar's ordinary time, for now the weeks up to the beginning of Lent on February 17.

Jesus is baptized! But we need to think carefully about this feast, if we are to get at what Mark, who first tells the story, thinks is important about the baptism of Jesus by John.

The setting is clear, as we heard just a few weeks ago, on the Second Sunday of Advent,

> "And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins… In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. (Mark 1.5, 9)

Mark does not speculate as to why Jesus came all the way from Nazareth to be baptized by John (who is not described as a cousin of Jesus, as he is in Luke): was it simply a demonstration of Jesus' humility, his solidarity with sinners, his dutiful appreciation of rites of repentance, his setting a good example for others?

Such elements may be involved, but if we stop with them, we miss much of the deeper meaning of today's Gospel. This is no ordinary ritual.

John the Baptist hints at what's at stake, when he readily admits the limits of his baptizing:

> "I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit. (1.8)

Water cleans the outside, even as plunging into a river shows in public a penitent's hope for a new, clean start. But the Spirit – inseparable from spirit, breath, life – has to do with what is deep inside us, our most intimate being-alive — and often acts invisibly.

Indeed, after Jesus was baptized, he has what seems to be a deep spiritual experience, his own experience of God, as the divide between God and the human is torn asunder:

> "Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove into him. (1.9-10)

And why a dove? Mark may be reminding us of the very beginning of the world. Genesis 1 does not mention a dove, but I (who know no Hebrew) am told that the "hovering" of God over the waters evokes the gentle flight of a dove:

> "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was *hovering* over the waters. (Genesis 1.1-2)

A later Rabbinic treatise makes explicit the hint at a comparison to a dove:

> "Ben Zoma explained: I was gazing between the upper and the lower waters, and there is only a bare three fingers' breadth between them, for it is said: And the spirit of God *hovered* over the face of the waters — like a dove which *hovers* over her young without touching them. (In the treatise Hagigah, Babylonian Talmud 15a)

The scene at the Jordan is a new creation, gentle and life-giving, God the Mother hovering over the chaos of our world.

The lovely *Odes of Solomon*, written later than Mark, seems to echo the tradition Mark has in mind:

> "As the wings of doves over their nestlings, and the mouths of their nestlings toward their mouths,
>
> So also are the wings of the Spirit over my heart.
>
> The dove fluttered over the head of our Lord Messiah, because he was her Head.

> And she sang over him, and her voice was heard. (Odes of Solomon 28.1, 3)

The dove gently comes down and hovers, in order to feed her young. She sings, and so she welcomes and protects the Messiah. Here too, the Spirit is like a mother hovering over her beloved child.

Even more: scholars note that the force of the Greek expression here is that the Spirit, first hovering like a dove, then enters *into* Jesus. So now I take a certain liberty of expanding the translation a bit:

> *"He* saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit hovering over him like a dove, then entering into him. (1.10)

What is happening seems to be an intensely personal, private experience. It is Jesus who sees the Spirit descending on him, and Mark (unlike Matthew and John) does not indicate that the crowds or even the Baptist sensed the Spirit coming down upon Jesus. Likewise (and unlike what happens at the Transfiguration, Mark 9.7), the voice from heaven seems to be directed only *to* Jesus:

> *"And a voice came from heaven*, "*You* are my Son, the Beloved; with *you* I am well pleased."

Clearly, Mark is telling us, something happened to Jesus that day. He something and heard something. This is made dramatically clear in the brief sequel (which we will come back to only in Lent): the Spirit now intimately within him, Jesus changes direction — turning not toward Nazareth whence he came, but out into the desert whence John had come:

> "And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. (1.12)

How could Jesus have a spiritual experience, particularly an experience of God, of the Spirit, with the announcement that he is God's Beloved? Shouldn't he have known this already in the manger in Bethlehem? Not so – the Son of God, he is truly human as we are, and he could learn and have new experiences, as at the Jordan. He finds out with great clarity and power that he is the Beloved, and so he must reimagine his entire life. It took forty days in the desert to realize what all this meant, and how he could never return home, the same as he had been before. And so:

> "He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him. (1.13)

As for us: if (as we should) we believe that in some small way we are invited to experience whatever Jesus experienced, then we can think anew about who we are as baptized children of God. Being baptized is not simply a tame ritual that we go through as infants or children or adults. It is not that Jesus' baptism was an ordinary event, like our baptisms. Rather, our baptisms are extraordinary, like his, By baptism, the Spirit gently comes down, hovers over us, enters inside us, becomes as intimate to us as our own breath. We too can't go home again, back to our Nazareth, the way things used to be. We too are drawn out into the desert where Jesus prayed, where before him John had prayed, and before them both the people of Israel had wandered for forty years on their way to the Promised Land. And then we too, like John and Jesus, can by the Spirit of God take up the ministry God has given us. Can we do this, really? Of course: by grace, we too are the Beloved of God. This is what begins in baptism and shapes our entire lives.

Beloved, baptized by water and the Spirit, sent into the world: this is the reality we can carry with us, when we hear this Gospel on this feast at the start of 2021 — a year of hope that begins still tinged with despair, amid a still fiercely raging pandemic that has killed two million people worldwide and more than 350,000 Americans; in a society where race and class and economic disparities stand out more starkly than ever; in a land riven with deep dissensions, our democracy more threatened than at any time since 1865. The world needs the good news, needs women and men who with patience and courage and love work quietly (and sometimes loudly) to change things. Can you and I do this, really? Of course: what cannot we not do, beloved of the Lord?

(For some insights in this homily I am indebted to the Rev. C. E. B. Cranfield's "The Baptism of Our Lord — a Study of St. Mark 1.9-11" (1955), and Alexey Somov's

“The Dove in the Story of Jesus’ Baptism” (2018). Contact me if you would like fuller reference to these fine articles.)

An earlier version of this homily was given in the recorded Mass for this weekend, now at the parish website.

Dr. Martin Luther King and the Quiet Realities of Real Vocations

January 15, 2021

We mark this weekend the national holiday in honor of Dr. Martin Luther King, one of the most important Americans of the 20th century and, arguably, among the key figures in American history. He spoke out for racial justice and the equal dignity of all, and he — along with many sisters and brothers, because he was never all alone — put his life on the line again and again, and despite verbal and physical threats did not back down, even to April 4, 1968, when he was murdered. Such a life, a model that all of us, whatever ethnic background, can aspire to.

He was an ordained minister, he had a doctorate from Boston University's School of Theology, and in 1955 he took up the work of ministry at a church in Montgomery, Alabama. All of that is a lot, and he surely would have been a wonderful minister through a long life. But he changed, he made hard choices, and he became an unexpected leader for African Americans and, as we found (often too late), a leader for all.

But why did he, and not the many others, become the leader and exemplar who made such a difference? Was it his special calling, his grace? My impression is that Dr. King did not hear a voice in the night calling to him, had no visions of Jesus calling him, and, born and raised in a spiritually committed family, was not a great sinner who underwent a radical conversion experience. It may be just that he rose to the moment when much was expected of him, all of a sudden: the word of God sparked within him at the right moment.

I am not a King scholar, but perhaps the day it all came together was on December 5, 1955. That evening, at his church in Montgomery, the Holt Street Baptist Church, he was unexpectedly put in charge. He was called upon with short notice to speak to the thousands who had gathered to confirm the bus boycott arising from the brave resistance of Mrs. Rosa Parks, who refused to give up her seat on a city bus to a white person, and was arrested for this effrontery to her “betters.” You can find the story of what happened that day in many places, included here, so it suffices to give what I find to be the central moment in his hastily written speech:

> “Mrs. Rosa Parks is a fine person. And since it had to happen I'm happy that it happened to a person like Mrs. Parks, for nobody can doubt the boundless outreach of her integrity. Nobody can doubt the height of her character, nobody can doubt the depth of her Christian commitment and devotion to the teachings of Jesus. And I'm happy since it had to happen, it happened to a person that nobody can call a disturbing factor in the community. Mrs. Parks

> is a fine Christian person, unassuming, and yet there is integrity and character there. And just because she refused to get up, she was arrested.
>
> "And you know, my friends, *there comes a time* when people get tired of being trampled over by the iron feet of oppression. *There comes a time*, my friends, when people get tired of being plunged across the abyss of humiliation where they experience the bleakness of nagging despair. *There comes a time* when people get tired of being pushed out of the glittering sunlight of life's July, and left standing amid the piercing chill of an alpine November. *There comes a time*.

You can also listen to Dr. King remember the boycott and what it meant...

There comes a time: the moment came, and unexpectedly Dr. King was on the spot. He rose to the occasion, he found his voice, and his life was never the same again. That is, he found his true vocation – within his vocation to ministry, within his vocation to a life of learning and scholarship. He found himself, a clear and brave voice, before God and his people. He could not expect December 5, 1955 to become such a landmark day. But so it was.

Finding one's mission in life and place before God is something of a mystery: if only it was easy to know exactly what God wants! But really, vocation is a mystery.

The Bible is of course full of many vocation stories: God unexpectedly choosing Abram and Sarah, soon to be **Abraham and Sarah**, father and mother of faith; confronting **Moses** in the burning bush; choosing **David** to be king, the youngest of many sons, only when all his older brothers were ignored by the great judge and prophet Samuel. Or prophets like Isaiah and **Jeremiah** and **Amos**, suddenly called upon, given a mission they had not asked for (just read the beginning of the book of each of these prophets for their stark, abrupt stories of calling). Or Saul, knocked down on the road to Damascus, in an instant transformed him into **Paul**, from persecutor of the new Christian community to its most eloquent defender.

Consider today's readings too. It would be so easy, we cannot but think, if we were like young Samuel, called by an insistent voice of God, or the apostles in John 1. The mighty Samuel was just a boy, awakened in the night:

> "One night Eli, whose eyes were becoming so weak that he could barely see, was lying down in his usual place. The lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the house of the Lord, where the ark of God was. Then the Lord called Samuel.

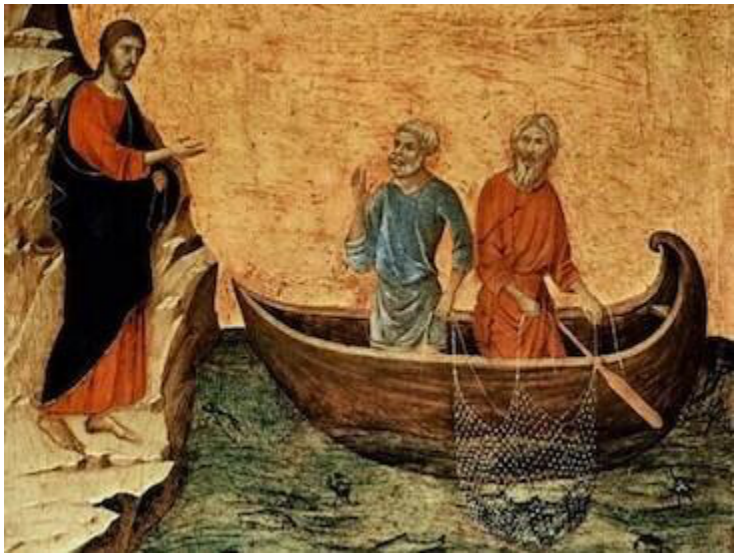
Samuel answered, “Here I am.” And he ran to Eli and said, “Here I am; you called me.” But Eli said, “I did not call; go back and lie down.” So he went and lay down. Again the Lord called, “Samuel!” And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, “Here I am; you called me.” “My son,” Eli said, “I did not call; go back and lie down.” You see, Samuel did not yet know the Lord: The word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him.

A third time the Lord called, “Samuel!” And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, “Here I am; you called me.” Then Eli realized that the Lord was calling the boy. So Eli told Samuel, “Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, ‘Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.’” So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

The Lord came and stood there, calling as at the other times, “Samuel! Samuel!” Then Samuel said, “Speak, for your servant is listening.”

The Lord was with Samuel as he grew up, and he let none of Samuel’s words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba recognized that Samuel was attested as a prophet of the Lord. (I Samuel 3.2-10, 19-20)

It seems really easy, in a way, to be awakened by God’s persistent call in the middle of the night; the grace was perhaps to be a light sleeper, so as to not sleep through the most important moment of your life. Yet it was not clear at the start, so Eli, soon to die for the sins of his sons (read I Samuel 4), helped the boy to realize that it was God calling his name. The boy finally got the point, and he was endowed with words of power, the Word of God entered into him.



Or take today’s Gospel, John 1, part of which we heard a few weeks ago in Advent:
"The next day John was there again with two of his disciples. When he saw Jesus passing by, he said, “Look, the Lamb of God!” When the two disciples heard him say this, they followed Jesus.

Turning around, Jesus saw them following and asked,

“What do you want?”

They said, “Rabbi,” “where are you staying?”

“Come and see.”

So they went and saw where he was staying, and they spent that day with him. It was about four in the afternoon. (John 1.35-39)

Come and see: this seems easy, to have Jesus right there to tell you in your own language to follow him. But really so easy? Maybe not. They didn't know who he was, and we never hear whether Jesus called other women and men there by the shore of the lake, who ignored him, or declined to leave their boats, or simply stayed loyal to John the Baptist. Why did these particular men, Andrew and his unnamed companion, and then (in the rest of the chapter) Peter and Philip and Nathanael, decide to follow Jesus, when presumably others did not? Perhaps for their whole lives they were getting ready, even if they didn’t know it, until the very moment when John pointed and Jesus invited, "Come and see" — and the spark was ignited.

Vocation: Even if we assume that our lives have a religious purpose — a vocation not as an occupation, but as a deep sense of what God wants of you and me — we may still be wondering how we are supposed to know. We probably are more like Dr. King, preparing with one vision of life in mind, only to find out that on one day at one moment, suddenly God enables us to rise to the occasion, and speak the truth that changes everything.

Most often, it seems that surprising vocations come about in unsurprising ways. **Thomas Merton**'s *Seven Storey Mountain* is a classic tale of a person’s slowly finding God in the midst of the myriad events of an ordinary middle class life in New York in the 1930s, and from there, he became the most famous monk in the world. Or **Dorothy Day**, finding God on the beach on Staten Island, confronted by the reality of her pregnancy and the hard choices she had to make about faith and marriage — and all of that only a preparation for the moment when Peter Maurin, that very odd Frenchman, walked into her life and suddenly founded the Catholic Worker, her ultimate calling in life. Or **Mother Teresa**, living a virtuous religious life at a school in Calcutta, only to hear another call one day, to leave the convent behind, and go out and live the rest of her life among the poorest of the poor, now a mother to all Indians of all faiths. **Or you**, when you made a change in your life because God was asking you to.

What began with Abram and Sarah and Samuel and Martin Luther King is continuing today. In our fragile 2021 we are struggling for safety and justice and decency. You and I may not think we are called, since because we haven't seen a burning bush or heard a voice in the night or got knocked on the ground. But we are called, we will be called, since God needs ordinary people who end up doing extraordinary things. So let us ponder the mystery of vocation at this holiday in honor of Dr. King, and during this week of pandemic and unrest and the new beginning that is the Inauguration of **Joe Biden** as our president. This old man, whom history seemed to have passed by, may suddenly be shown to be a crucial servant of God in the crisis that is 2021.

Oh, For a Prophet Like Jonah!

January 22, 2021

This Sunday, the 3rd in Ordinary Time, we hear of the beginning of the public ministry of Jesus:

"Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news[i] of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” (Mark 1.14-15)

Then, like now, the good news is needed, and it must be announced in a voice that resonates the power of God. Jesus did it perfectly, but he wanted others to share the mission. And so this week too we return to the theme of vocation introduced last week with passages from I Samuel and John 1, this time in Mark’s words:

> "As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. “Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will make you fishers of men.” At once they left their nets and followed him. When he had gone a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John in a boat, preparing their nets. Without delay he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him. (Mark 1.16-20)

On our better days, I am sure we all pray for grace to be as quick and generous and fearless as these first disciples, as well as the unmentioned women too. But as I asked last week: what about others, those who might hesitate, disagree about where Jesus intends to lead them, run in the opposite direction? For God chooses stubborn people too, rebels who end up doing God’s work, despite themselves.

To illustrate this, we have the refreshingly contrary story of Jonah, that mysterious man who does not want to do God’s will, but does it marvelously despite himself. To understand the too short passage from the Book of Jonah (3.1-5, 10) we hear in church, however, we need to understand the whole book, which is really a short drama in four acts. In Act One, Jonah hears the voice of God — and runs the other way, for whatever reason, we cannot be sure — perhaps because he, a Jew, does not want to help the pagans in Nineveh? The account begins simply enough:

> "Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, “Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness

has come up before me.” But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord. (Jonah 1.1-3)

But a great storm at sea arises, and the ship is sinking. Jonah finally confesses to the sailors that the storm is sent by God to thwart his escape. He urges the men to throw him overboard, which they reluctantly do. He is a good man, not wanting the sailors to perish; perhaps he also wants to die and get it over with. Then surely God will leave him alone!

Immediately the storm ends, and most famously, a great fish (henceforth, let us say “whale”) swallows Jonah. Somehow safely stored in the belly of the whale, in Act Two Jonah is alone on stage, and again he shows that even when he is rebelling, he is a good person who is intimately in touch with God. Here is part of his moving prayer:

"I called to the Lord out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice. You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me; all your waves and your billows passed over me... I went down to the land whose gates closed upon me forever; yet you brought up my life from the Pit, O Lord my God. As my life was ebbing away, I remembered the Lord; and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple. (2.2-3, 6b-7)

At God's bidding, the kindly whale then ejects Jonah onto the beach. At the start of Act Three, he once more hears God’s voice. This time, perhaps stunned by the fact that he is still alive, Jonah finally does what he is asked to do. He goes to the great city of Nineveh, and manages to convert the entire city in a few days:

"The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, “Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.” So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days’ walk across. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s walk. And he cried out, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth. (3.1-5)

The king agrees, and mourning becomes the official policy of the city, for himself and even for the animals of Nineveh:

"When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: “By the decree of the king and his

> nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. (3.6-8a)

What more could anyone ask?!

Thereupon God decides not to destroy the city:

> "When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it. (3.1-10)

But the saga is not over. Act Four begins with Jonah now seeming once more to resent the power that had flowed through him, despite himself — as if he still wants to see Nineveh destroyed, or at least to die himself:

> "But this conversion of Nineveh was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. He prayed to the Lord and said, “O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.” (4.1-3)

The Lord chides him for his anger, but Jonah sulks in the desert heat. God then is gentle, but with a twist: he makes a shady bush for Jonah to rest under, and for this small kindness Jonah is very grateful. But the next morning God sends a large worm that kills the bush – and now Jonah is furious that the bush has withered and its shade been lost to him. Ever honest, once again he complains. But the Book of Jonah ends as God drives home one more lesson:

> “Jonah, is it right for you to be angry about the bush?” “Yes, angry enough to die!”
>
> “You care for a bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow, though it came into being in a night and perished in a night? Should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals too?” (4.9-11)

God loves people and whales and small animals and worms too, for they too do God’s bidding. Would not God care for Jonah too?

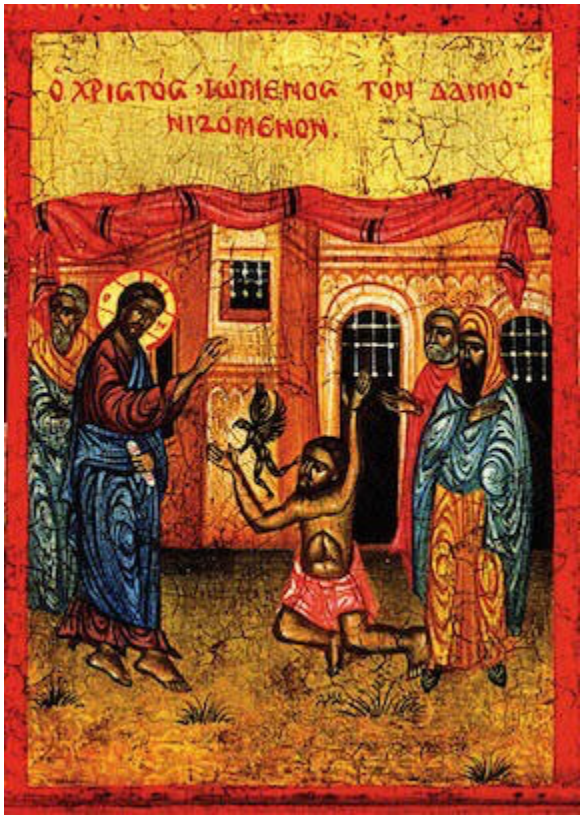
We don't have Jonah's response to God, since there is no Act Five — unless the *Book of Jonah itself* is Jonah's response. That is, with brutal honesty he writes down the story of his own stubbornness, and of the stern but saving God who pursued him even when he refused to cooperate; a God whose mercy is greater than his justice, the Lord who got Jonah to do greater things than he ever wanted to do. Jonah's message: it is amazing that once upon a time, God spared Nineveh by means of my word; but it is amazing too, even now, that God did not give up on people like me, but has worked wonders through us no matter how hard we try to run away. God and I fought, God won, and so I became the instrument of God's good news to people at the edge of doom. I was still stubborn and hard to please, but God never gave up on me. *So too you, my reader,* Jonah seems to be saying.

For every John and James, Peter and Andrew, there may be many more Jonahs among us, unexpectedly doing God's will even when we think we cannot, will not: irritable, disgruntled, distrusting, and yet in the end amazing instruments of a love greater than ourselves. Pray then to be like Peter and the others — but if you have no such lofty hopes, pray simply to be like Jonah, saved and saving in the ups and downs of your own life, simply because God knows better than we do what we are capable of, the love we can show even when we are tempted to give up, run the other way.

(You can find an earlier, oral version of this homily in the OLOS parish mass for this weekend here.

He Speaks with Authority!

January 29, 2021



Over the last few Sundays our readings have put vocation — calling to God's service — before us: Samuel; the first disciples; and Jonah who tried to flee a Word he could no more escape can he could elude his own shadow. A variant on the same theme continues for the next three weeks (until Lent starts): how Jesus spoke; related to people in need; touched the untouchable; was unafraid to be alone. All of this is still within the richly packed first chapter of the Gospel according to Mark, the first of all the Gospels.

We've heard parts of Mark 1 recently — on the Second Sunday of Advent, the Baptism of the Lord, and just last Sunday, as he began to preach the beginning of the kingdom in our midst:

> "After John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." (1.14-15)

The kingdom is not merely a good idea or a promise; it is a life-changing and transformative reality, revealed in the Word Jesus proclaims.

Now Mark introduces us still more deeply to Jesus, not by telling us about him, but by showing us Jesus in action. Over the next Sundays, we see Jesus preaching, healing, sharing a meal, praying by himself, daring to touch a leper and – this Sunday — driving out an unclean spirit.

Today's scene begins simply. That Jesus is a powerful, convincing preacher is not surprising to us; but here, at the beginning of his ministry on an ordinary morning on the Sabbath day, Jesus captivates the unsuspecting congregation because he is so different from the teachers and preachers they are used to:

> "Jesus and his disciples went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. The people were

> astonished at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the students of the law. (Mark 1.21-22)

There is no reason at all for us to demean the life-long students of the Law, as if they are all literalists or hard-hearted sticklers on rules. Perhaps they just loved the Torah and dedicated their lives to it. The point here is simply that whereas most students and teachers gained their knowledge by study, Jesus speaks from his own sense of his inner, godly reality. This inner authority — the power to speak surely and freely, true and unafraid — is straight from God. As such the purity and power of his word astonishes – more literally, knocks off their feet — those who heard him on that ordinary morning in that small-town synagogue.

Enough for one day — but Mark then complicates this already compelling scene by a sudden interruption:

> "Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an impure spirit cried out, “What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!” (1.23-24)

Most remarkable: the impure spirit, which holds the man hostage, knows name and place: You are Jesus, and you are from Nazareth. It knows more grandly the unique reality of Jesus, calling him by one of the loftier titles in the New Testament: You are the Holy One of God. And the unclean spirit can even predict the future: You come here, O Jesus, O Holy One, you announce the Kingdom, you speak a word of power from your very depths — and now you are going to end *our* kingdom, which seems to be a place of ignorance, deceit, preying on the weak.

Mark is deliberate in inserting this scene. It is one thing, wonderful enough, for Jesus to show up and teach and preach as he had planned, in accord with the ritual order of the day. But to encounter a disruption raises the tension — as would be case if in the middle of Mass someone stood up and started shouting in a very loud voice at the priest, a person apparently possessed by a foreign spirit. What to do then? Let the ushers intervene? Call 911?

What can Jesus do in a sudden confrontation, less expected than his encounter with Satan in the desert? But now the solution is easy, for Jesus rather

quicky deflates the scene. He shows that his astounding, authoritative voice is also a voice of more immediate power. He simply rebukes the spirit and orders it out of the man:

> “Be quiet!” said Jesus sternly. “Come out of him!” The impure spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek. (1.25-26)

Be quiet. Get out of him - right now. Leave him be. Be gone! Once again, the people react powerfully:

> "What is this? A new teaching—and with authority! He even gives orders to impure spirits and they obey him! (1.27)

His words open up reality, and open the way to God, and change individuals right now, setting free this possessed man. But as a living Word should, the speaking of Jesus also gives power to the congregation. For now the word about Jesus spreads, not yet because he himself is travelling around, but by word of mouth that races ahead of him:

> "News about him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee. (1.28)

This new speech — in the voice of people who previously only listened — is not gossip, mere tidbits of news about Jesus. People astounded by the Word of Jesus run out, run home, and tell others what they saw and heard, bringing hope and freedom to those willing to trust what is said to them. But it continues, as those people too, who were not even in the synagogue, run off and tell others. And so the Good News is preached, not just by Jesus, but by everyone who has ever allowed the Word of God to penetrate them and set them free.

So in the end this is, as always, about us. It all begins in the Word, rightly spoken and rightly heard. In church and out of it, we hear a lot about Jesus. But how do we speak about Jesus — whence does *our* word arise? From books we’ve read, from online homilies such as this one — or from our personal encounters with the

Holy One of God? Do our words testify to the coming of the kingdom right here and now? Dare we tell about the time when God banished our own unclean spirits? All this is possible, if we keep it simple, just listening, being touched, being liberated, and then, in new freedom, learning to speak: if we speak to our neighbors what God has spoken in our hearts and lives, then our word is alive with God's Word.

Mark has more to say. In the next two weeks, we will hear more about Jesus as healer, Jesus in prayer, and Jesus in solidarity with the excluded and marginalized. But it all begins, Mark tells us, in ordinary synagogues and churches, among ordinary people — and by the sign of an occasional dark spirit in our midst, driven out by the holiness of God among us.

Come Away, to a Quiet Place

February 5, 2021

We continue our reading of Mark 1 this week (and next week too), and we find before us another scene still near the beginning of the ministry of Jesus. Who is Jesus? What is his message? Mark gives no lecture, but simply says: see what he does, how he treats people, where he goes, how he spends his time, and you will know who he is and why he is the One we have been waiting for.

Last week, Mark told us of Jesus preaching in the synagogue in Capernaum, and by a simple rebuke, driving out an unclean spirit, and thereupon unleashing in the congregation a living word that spread from mouth to mouth like wild fire until Jesus was known everywhere in Galilee. This week Jesus lingers in Capernaum. He stops by Peter's home for what was surely to be a social occasion, a relaxing day off with family and friends, a good meal, good wine. Jesus probably met Simon Peter's wife and perhaps children and, for sure, his mother-in-law:

> "As soon as they left the synagogue, they went with James and John to the home of Simon and Andrew. Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they immediately told Jesus about her. So he went to her, took her hand and helped her up. The fever left her and she began to wait on them. (Mark 1.29-31)

Now this scene might be interpreted as rather too efficient: the poor lady has been sick, and Jesus does cure her — so that she can serve them their meal, one more woman at the service of men. But perhaps the point is rather that in the house of Peter's in-laws, she is the matriarch, hostess, mother of a great family, always welcoming guests new and old – and now she is sorely distressed that she cannot offer her customary hospitality to Peter and his new friend and guide. So Jesus sets her free, and the hospitality is grand.

They have a good time. Jesus and companions spend all day there, and are still there, even after sunset:

> "That evening after sunset the people brought to Jesus all the sick and demon-possessed. The whole town gathered at the door, and Jesus healed many who had various diseases. He also drove out many demons, but he would not let the demons speak because they knew who he was. (1.32-34)

In a sense, this is a reverse of other scenes: Jesus is not traveling here and there. Rather, he is simply sitting on the front porch. People are coming to him, all the friends and neighbors of Peter and his family. Jesus turns no one away; he simply helps and heals, body, mind and soul.

This scene will be repeated over and over, and today's reading ends on precisely that note — other towns to visit, people to be helped:

"Simon and his companions went to look for him, and when they found him, they exclaimed: "Everyone is looking for you!" Jesus said, "Let us go somewhere else — to the nearby villages — so I can preach there also. That is why I have come." So he traveled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons. (1.36-39)

All of this is quite wonderful, both the intimate details and the larger scene, Jesus enacting the kingdom rather than just talking about it.

But I find most interesting and important what Mark adds just before today's Gospel ends:

> "Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a quiet place, where he prayed. (1.35)

A quiet place: this is the third of four times such a place is mentioned in Mark 1, all with the same Greek word, *erēmos* (desert, solitude). John comes forth from the quiet place that is the desert; baptized, Jesus is driven by the Spirit out into that same quiet place. Later on, at the chapter's end (in next week's reading), the word is spreading so quickly that Jesus seems to hide, "no longer entering any town openly, but staying outside in quiet places…" (1.45)

So this day, after the meal, and after healing one and all, Jesus went off to pray by himself. How does he pray? We are not told. In Mark, Jesus does not much instruct us in prayer. He gives us no Our Father, as do Matthew and Luke. But Mark here too teaches by example. Jesus now, and other times too, returns to the quiet places of the desert where the Spirit had spoken to John, where God and Satan had pulled Jesus himself this way and that.

By this principle - by grace, do as Jesus does - we are reminded that when we are busy, too busy, with a thousand cares and concerns whirling around us and inside us — then, we too, like Jesus, need to pull back, leave the work aside, and retreat to our own quiet place. When you have the least time to pray, then pray.

Find your solitude, find it regularly, even a few minutes a day. Your quiet place could be in the woods, or by the ocean, or a quiet walk when no one is around. Or simply in your own home, phone turned off, computer screen darkened, or lying in your bed late at night, wide awake, just watching, waiting, resting.

How am I to pray? Big books are written on this topic! But perhaps the point is simpler than that: go to the quiet place, unclutter your mind and heart, learn to stop doing — and let God do the rest. Perhaps prayer is not what we do, but is something God does to, for us, in us. St. Paul puts it this way:

> "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. (Romans 8.26-27)

Perhaps Paul is catching something of the prayer of Jesus himself.

Jesus actually invites us to this quiet prayer, God praying in us, as Mark makes clear, a few chapters later, at a hard moment in Jesus' ministry: John has been beheaded, Jesus' enemies are gaining ground, yet the crowds keep coming, giving Jesus and his disciples no time to eat or sleep or relax. Jesus realizes that what he needs, his disciples need:

> "Because so many people were coming and going that his disciples did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, "Come with me, just you, to a quiet place and get some rest." So they went away by themselves in a boat to a quiet place. (6.31-32)

A message for us: come with Me to a quiet place and get some rest — rest, be quiet, let God speak to and in you. We just have to answer the call. If we want to be better able to find God in our homes, in our families, if we want to be unafraid in admitting the hurts in our bodies, minds, and hearts, and if we want to help and heal one another — then let us accept this call and come away to the quiet place, that God may find us and speak to us again, as in the beginning. God does the praying, we just have to be there.

(After this writing, OLOS longtime parishioner Carol Greve-Philips called to my attention this very apt quotation from St. Francis de Sales: "Everyone of us needs half an hour of prayer each day, except when we are busy – then we need an hour.")

(an earlier version of this homily can be found in the video for the Sunday Mass of this weekend, here)

Jesus Reached Out His Hand and Touched the Man

February 13, 2021

On this final Sunday before Lent begins on February 19, we come to the end of the first chapter of the Gospel of Mark, which has occupied our attention since Advent, and over the last three Sundays. (And yes, we return to it on the first Sunday of Lent, going back to Jesus in the desert.) Mark introduces Jesus to us by deeds, not words, by showing us what he does, how he meets people, how he prays, helps and heals those in need.

The closing scene today is simple and poignant: Jesus heals a leper — and more than that, he touches a leper, that untouchable of the ancient world, Even today, the leper is a stand-in for the person who is kept out of sight, away from our homes and dinner tables, that we might protect ourselves from the perceived uncleanness of their bodies, their lives and lifestyles. Think of the hard walls of racism and sexism and every kind of bias that dehumanizes and degrades our sister and brother, making lepers of God's children. During this pandemic, indeed, we have all had to deal with the distancing, isolating, and loneliness that come about when people become afraid even to be near one another. Suppose it was your whole life?

The background is given in Leviticus 13-14, which reads like the medical guidebook that it is, listing all kinds of blemishes and sores and infections. As with so many illnesses, though, the medical condition turns into a social and moral disaster for the afflicted one:

> "The person who has the leprous disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be disheveled; and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, "Unclean, unclean." He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp. (Leviticus 13.45-46)

So Mark is choosing to end his first chapter in an extreme situation, Jesus suddenly faced by a desperate man whose life had been ruined by his disease:

> "A man with leprosy came to Jesus. Falling down before Jesus, he begged him, "If you will, you can make me clean." (Mark 1.40)

If you will. My guess is that the man is used to being ignored, not even noticed by those passing by, not even allowed to be seen anywhere near you and me. He is probably used to being subtly or crudely rejected when asking for help — like men and women on our streets who beg "money for food," as I walk by, going about my

business, and give nothing. Perhaps he expected to be ignored once more. But quite the opposite happens:

> "Jesus was deeply moved.

Jesus' heart is broken for the poorest of the poor, the least of God's children, the man afflicted in body and soul.

Note: some commentators say that there was originally a harsher Greek word here, which would mean, "Jesus was deeply angered." Why? Because he could not imagine *not* helping this miserable leper who had been shunned by everyone else, and was disturbed that the man said to him, "*If you will,* you can make me clean." How could you imagine, Jesus is thinking, that *I* would not help *you*? Was it not for you, to encounter you today, that I came into the world? And so Jesus cries out,

> "I am willing! Be clean!

But he does even more — he crosses the abyss of customs and taboos, breaks through the circles of exclusion in order to do what no one else will do:

> "Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. (1.41)

We can imagine the scene. Jesus bends down, perhaps kneels down, to no longer be above this poor child of God. He touches the man who had been in the dust at his feet. In fact, I would add, he does not simply touch him with one finger — he embraces him.

But why bother? Jesus, whose word is so powerful, surely could have made him clean just by a word, as he did with the unclean spirit only the day before, "Be gone, leave him!" He will cure many people from a distance. But it is an extra gift, is it not, that he embraces a man no one else would touch at all? It is one thing to have leprosy. It is another, and worse, to be shunned and despised, doomed to a life of loneliness, never cared for, never touched, never embraced, never kissed.

Jesus knows the importance of touch. Earlier, he had taken Peter's mother-in-law by the hand and helped her get up. Later, and surely many times more, he touches a person in need:

> "They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. Jesus took him aside in private, away from the crowd. He put his fingers into his ears; he spat and touched his tongue. Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha, be opened." And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. Then Jesus ordered them to tell

> no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. (7.31-35)

Once you are touched by God, even once, there is no stopping the flow of power. You can stand up again, and see, and hear and speak: you are restored in society. Perhaps this is a deeper purpose of the Incarnation, that God and humans might finally meet on the road, all five senses now fully alive.

In Mark 1, the former leper is now clean, but he is still a desperate man. Now he cannot stop talking. He immediately returns to the towns and villages from which he had been excluded for so long, no longer ashamed and beaten down:

> "He went forth and began to talk freely, spreading the news.

And so the crowds grow greater and greater, every person possessed by an unclean spirit, every sick housewife, every leper, every person lost in body and soul, all running after Jesus:

> "As a result, Jesus could no longer enter a town openly — he stayed outside in the lonely places. Yet still, people came to him from everywhere. (1.45)

See Jesus, how he acts, whom he makes clean and heals and touches. Make yourself part of his story, be touched by him, be healed and then you too, speak in his name, good news for souls but also bodies and hearts too.

And thus ends the Gospel on the Sunday before Lent begins. But really, this year, here might be the key to the whole of Lent: simply to read and re-read Mark 1 (perhaps in as many translations as you can find), and see it all: John coming out of the desert; Jesus coming from Nazareth; the Baptism and the desert; the call of the disciples; amazing preaching in the synagogue and the driving out of the unclean spirit; dinner at the house of Peter, whose mother-in-law Jesus made well; meeting and touching this leper; and, as last week, taking time to pray, that is, to let God flow quietly as Spirit through us, that we be emptied out but always filled again and again by the Word of God in the flesh, the God who kneels in the dirt next to you and me and touches us when no one else will.

Certaintly, one recipe for a better Lent is just to re-read Mark 1 every day, an original and old story that is now our story.

Tested by Satan, Comforted by Angels

February 19, 2021

Each year on the first Sunday of Lent we are invited to contemplate Jesus in the desert, where he goes after he has been baptized by John the Baptist, and his identity and mission validated by the heavenly voice and the Spirit hovering over him. As Jesus spent forty days in the desert, and as the people of Israel had spent forty years in the desert after Sinai and before their arrival in Canaan, so we are to follow the example of Jesus during these forty days, praying, fasting, and performing acts of charity, sharing all that we have received.

It is fair though to ask how we are to learn from Jesus's time in the desert. This year we hear Mark 1, to which we return for the 7th time since the beginning of Advent:

> "And at once the Spirit drove him out into the wilderness, and he was in the wilderness forty days, being tested by Satan, and he was with the wild animals, and angels cared for him. (Mark 1.12-13)

As always, Mark says so little and so much, but if we pay attention to this passage in detail, we can learn much from it.

The first point is that Jesus didn't simply choose to go on a retreat, take few days away by himself after his baptism, to prepare for his coming ministry. This sudden flight to the desert was not even his own choice. Perhaps he had planned instead to go home, as did all the others baptized by John. But he was driven — expelled, thrown — into the desert by the Spirit which had come down upon him at the Jordan. We would do well to pray for the same grace, not to plan our own Lent, but to let the Spirit push us into the uncharted territory of the forty days before us. Breath deep, let go, go.

Mark does not tell us a lot about what happened in the desert, but the few details he gives us can help us greatly. First, he was tested, tempted, by Satan. This too happened to him, not of his own choosing. Satan – the tempter, the devil – is a living reality for Jesus and for Mark, who refers to him and Jesus' contest with him four more times in the Gospel. For example, Satan tramples the Word that falls upon people who are shallow and easily dissuaded (4.15); Peter, of all people, tries to persuade Jesus to settle for a glorious and happy mission (8.33) Satan is ever on the lookout to stifle the word of God, to get people to misinterpret who Jesus is and ultimately to confuse Jesus himself. Unclean spirits too abound in Mark's richly populated universe: the spiritual world is real.

But what was the test, the temptation? We are used to pondering the three temptations dramatically enacted by Matthew and Luke – make bread from stones; tempt God by jumping off the peak of the temple; worship me, says Satan, and the whole world will be yours. But Mark gives no such story, but we can infer this by attending to the final part of today's Gospel, what Jesus says when he comes out of the desert:

> "After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. "The time has come, the kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!" (1.14-15)

The kingdom of God: here and now — not on an ever-receding horizon, at the end of time, nor in some other, better heavenly place. Jesus realizes that he is not even like John, who came to prophesy a kingdom and a messiah who will come gloriously but later on. The Spirit drove out Jesus into the desert to enable him to see with stark clarity that the time had come — here, now! In the desert, dismissing Satan's temptations, Jesus took hold of his own identity.

This too is a lesson for our Lent. But this scenario is so very grand that we may rightly back away: "Nothing like that for me this Lent! I am no messiah! I just want to be a better person!" But cannot the Spirit drive us off into the wilderness too? Perhaps this year and right now, I am called to some new moment, some turning point in my vocation and life's journey. God may want something from you this year, that God has not asked before. The point of Lent — pulling back, dwelling for a time in a lonely place – is to open ourselves to the Spirit of God by exposing Satan, uncovering the devilish tricks that make us water down our vocations, opt for safe paths, trying to be good enough but not radically good, ready for the coming of the kingdom not now but later on: the dulling temptations that make good people spiritually dull people. But in 2021 we cannot afford dullness, we need heralds and prophets of God's kingdom right now, amid pandemic, injustice, poverty and the host of other ailments afflicting our world.

None of us can really say more specifically what God wants of us, his beloved children. But my guess is that hints are coming all the time. Lent is about slowing down and stripping bare the space around us, that we might hear the whispers God sends our way, moments of light, touches of consolation that surprise us on an ordinary day.

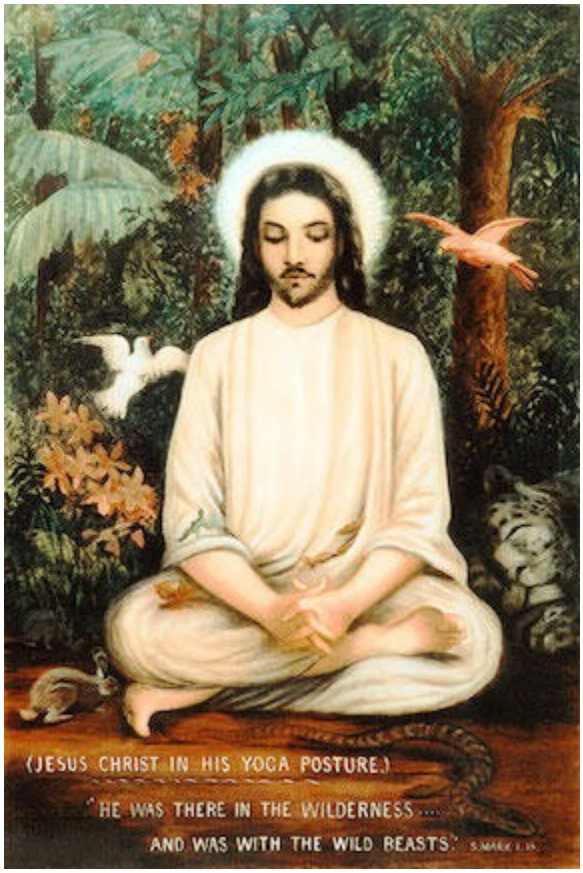
Mark gives us just two other clues that fill out the scene in the most wonderful ways. First, Mark says that Jesus was “with the wild animals.” It is a subject of great debate as to why Mark says this; Matthew and Luke do not. We know there are wild animals in the desert — so what? Some scholars say the beasts are a threat to Jesus; others, that he tames them and they come to trust him. This passage from Isaiah came to my mind:

> "See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not see it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland. The wild animals honor me, the jackals and the owls, because I provide water in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland, to give drink to my people, my chosen, the people I formed for myself that they may proclaim my praise. (43.19-21)

The Spirit surrounds Jesus, and Satan assaults him, but he does not yield. The animals in their simplicity sense who Jesus is, and they come to him and stay with him, giving him a kind of flesh and blood solidarity amid all the spiritual turmoil. Perhaps for us too, the quiet of Lent may give us this unexpected resource, closeness to the many smaller living things around us: house plants, sturdy trees that survive the winter, brave crocuses pushing up through the snow; spiders on the windows, ants on the porch, the mouse that scurries through the kitchen, your faithful dog or your cat, the squirrels and rabbits, Canadian geese and the wild turkeys — all sent to us, to be near us in these days of Lent.

Finally, there is a simple closing to the scene:

> "And angels cared for him. (1.13)



And what does this mean? Certainly, Mark believed not only in the Spirit and in Satan, and not only in the myriad impure spirits that torment people throughout his Gospel, but also the angels, those messengers from God who come and care for us, comfort us when we are in the desert, tried and on trial. Angels: spiritual messengers straight from God, but also angels in disguise, friends and family, the surprising people who help us to hear God's call and stick with it, here and now, just by a gentle touch and a kind word.

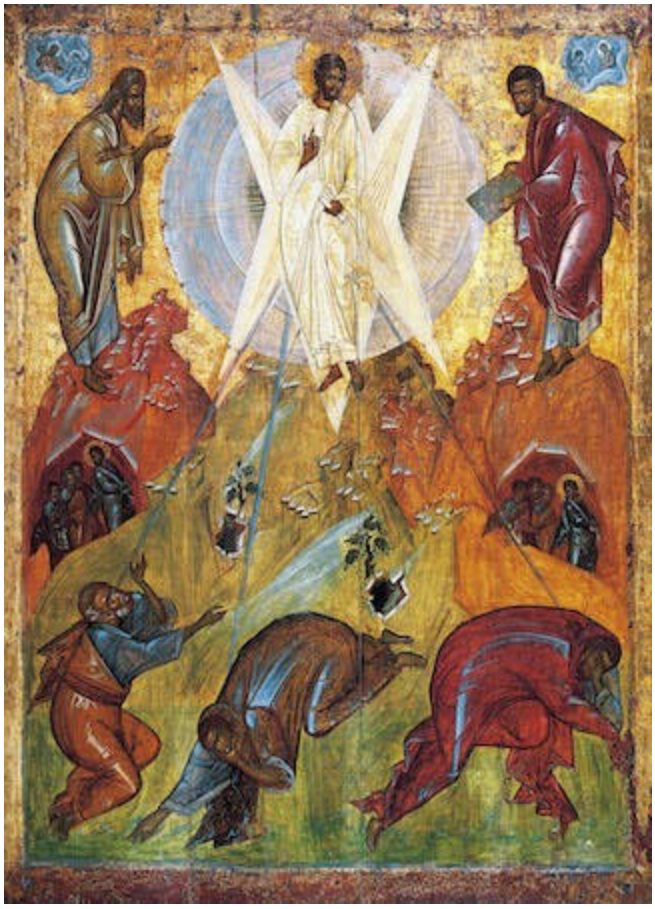
Let us then pray that our Lent this year has a bit of Mark to it: driven by the Spirit — alone for a time in lonely places — staring down Satan — amid all manner of living beings, touched by angels. Let us pray that when Easter 2021 arrives, we find ways to say in our own words, "The time has come, the kingdom of God has come near: here and now."

Moreover: Today's Gospel has also played a part in a fascinating interfaith venture that took place in San Francisco in 1908. There is a painting of Jesus that is famous in Hindu and interreligious circles: Jesus deep in meditation. It was painted in 1908 by Mrs. Theodosia Oliver. She seems to have become a disciple of Swami Gunatitanda, one of the first Hindu swamis of the Ramakrishna Vedanta Society in the USA, even as she also remained a Catholic. For the swami and his new center, she painted Jesus meditating in a yoga pose. And when she gave the painting its title, "Jesus Christ in His Yoga Position," she adds part of today's reading, "He was there in the wilderness and was with the wild beasts." Jesus at prayer in the desert: an unexpected bridge among religious people everywhere!

(An earlier, oral version of this homily is part of this weekend's parish Mass, here.)

In the Shadow of Abraham

February 26, 2021



Every year on the Second Sunday of Lent (February 28 this year) we are invited to ascend the mountain with Jesus and several chosen disciples, to contemplate the remarkable event of the Transfiguration:

"After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There he was transfigured before them. His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus. (Mark 9.2-4)

The scene seems glorious, the conversations solemn, and as at the Baptism, Jesus is commended by a voice from heaven:

"This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him! (9.7)

But at its conclusion, the event is connected to Jesus' coming journey to Jerusalem and passage through death:

> "As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus gave them orders not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead. They kept the matter to themselves, discussing what "rising from the dead" meant. And they asked him, "Why do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?" (9.9-11)

Jesus knows clearly that he will go up to Jerusalem, and that he will die there — and that God promises that he will rise again. What happened to John – Elijah – is what Jesus himself faces:

> "Jesus replied, 'To be sure, Elijah does come first, and restores all things. Why then is it written that the Son of Man must suffer much and be rejected? I tell you, Elijah has come, and they have done to him everything they wished, just as it is written about him.' (9.12-13)

We can only imagine though what this will mean for Jesus personally: how do you keep following your vocation, embracing your mission, when you know that every step brings you closer to the cross?

Our first reading today from Genesis 22 offers a kind of answer. It puts before us the terrible scene of the near-sacrifice of Isaac by his father Abraham, at God's direct command:

> "Sometime later God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied. Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, whom you love — Isaac — and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you." (Genesis 22.1-2)

Abraham obeys, and he and Isaac travel slowly to Moriah (perhaps the future Jerusalem). Just as he is about to slaughter Isaac, the angel of the Lord intervenes:

> "When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. But the angel of the Lord called out to him from heaven, "Abraham! Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied. "Do not lay a hand on the boy," he said. "Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son." (22.9-12)

Horribly tested, and found faithful. But could there be a worse test, than to be asked to kills one's own child? Will there not be a bitter taste in the mouth of the Abraham, as if faith is some kind of callous game God plays?

When we think of this story, we often identify Jesus with Isaac: as the son nearly sacrificed, so too the Son will be sacrificed on the cross.

But rather than Isaac, it seems to me that our readings link Jesus to the faithful, long-suffering, sorely tried Abraham, even if he is not there on the mountain with Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. Abraham is a man who is intimate with God — who speaks directly to him repeatedly — and whose faith is sorely tested, as he is repeatedly on the edge of losing everything, even as God keeps promising him everything. He is like Jesus.

To understand this, we must read back a few chapters, since Genesis 22 is only the end portion of a prolonged and worsening trial played out over the preceding chapters.

Even as early as Genesis 11, when God first calls out to Abram – soon to be Abraham – he promises him a lineage of descendants beyond counting, even if he is more than 80 years old, does not yet have a son, while his wife Sarai — soon to be Sarah — is well beyond the child-bearing age. The promise is certain, irrevocable, but seemingly absurd. And then everything goes wrong, as this summary suggests:

+ Sarah cannot have children, so in order to have an heir, Abraham at age 86 impregnates Hagar, Sarah's Egyptian slave. But Sarah resents this and mistreats Hagar, making her flee into the desert. But an angel comes to comfort Hagar and tells her to return to Abraham and Sarah. In their house she bears her child, Ishmael, who is loved by Abraham. (c. 16)

+ A few years later Sarah finally does have a child, Isaac, when Abraham is 100 years old and she is near 90. Sarah is again unhappy, and she no longer wants Hagar and Ishmael around to remind her of those earlier days of sorrow. At her behest, Abraham again sends out into the desert Hagar and Ishmael, whom he loves as his son, ill-provisioned, seemingly doomed. But God intervenes and saves them, and promises a mighty heritage also for Ishmael (who is highly revered in Islam, as a chosen one in whom God's promises are fulfilled). (c 21)

+ *Then* God commands Abraham to sacrifice Isaac (c. 22)

(As if all this is not enough, for some reason the bulk of chapters 18-19 is taken up with the evils of Sodom and Gomorrah, the endangerment of Lot, Abraham's brother, and the total destruction of the cities, despite Abraham's plea for mercy, for the sake of the innocent. Massive destruction setting the scene for the sacrifice to follow?)

By the time God commands Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, his dear and now only son, he and Sarah, and Hagar and Ishmael, have been sorely tested more than once, the clarity and improbability of God's promises ever more sharply delineated: believe me, says the Lord, even if everything goes against my word. Take the knife to your only son, kill him yourself: trust me.

All of that, as awful as it may be, is a fiery context for today's Gospel. Jesus too is being pushed by God to the limit, glorious promises coupled with the looming threat

of ignominious death. Jesus' every good word and good work lead him closer to the cross. He knows this, but he does not run away. Like Abraham, he embraces the absurdity of faith, never giving up on the deeper truth that God's promises always come true.

The Lenten readings always have something to teach us. Today's pairing of Genesis 22 and Mark 9 calls us to a certain brutal honesty and hard courage in Lent 2021. We are a full year into the testing and trial, death and disruption, of the woeful global tragedy that is Covid 19; a host of other torments have beset us too, ranging from ugly racism to climate degradation and the dreary obscenities of grinding poverty; personal losses large and small: we may find and feel all of this to be thrown in our face, as taunting us to give up and turn away. Abraham and Jesus shows us how to stand firm, unblinking before what lies before us.

It is usually good and right to count our blessings, and to be thankful for all God has done for us. But this week, the Transfiguration shines upon our lives a harsh light that reveals everything just as it is, death and all. Jesus stands in the shadow of Abraham, and we are invited with fear and trembling to see ourselves in their shadow, called in our small ways to pay the price of faith in a faithless world. If Abraham looked again and again into the abyss, and did not stop believing; if Jesus too, in the harsh bright light of the Transfiguration, looked his death in the face and kept walking right into it, then we too can stick with our faith even in the worst of times: "God does not lie, God will lead me through this darkness too."

Note: above I wrote the words, "fear and trembling," which many of you will have recognized as an echo of Soren Kierkegaard's powerful book on the true meaning of faith, *Fear and Trembling*. It circles around the dark secrets of the near killing of Isaac by Abraham. You can find at least parts of the text online, and a summary of his interpretation of the Abraham story here.

Purify the Temple, Come to the Feast

March 5, 2021

John 2 tells us that the public ministry of Jesus begins in Cana, in this mysterious but lovely scene:

"On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, “They have no wine.” And Jesus said to her, “Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.” His mother said to the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.” Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, “Fill the jars with water.” And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them, “Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward.” So they took it. When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom and said to him, “Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now.” (John 2.1-10)

By the end of this scene, we may be thinking: thus Jesus has come to help us to celebrate life and human love. Cana is a symbol of the eternal feast to which we are called. Jesus has come that we might love one another and live in community, celebrating the goods of body and soul: “I have come that you may have life, and life to the full.” (10.10) Yes, let there be an abundance of food and wine and love! Who needs the rest of the Gospel, if the feast of love has begun in Cana?

But John must think otherwise, since immediately after Cana he offers a surprisingly, shockingly different next scene, our Gospel for this Third Sunday in Lent:

> "In the temple courts he found people selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money. So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple courts, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. To those who sold doves he said, “Get these out of here! Stop turning my Father’s house into a market!” His disciples remembered that it is written: “Zeal for your house will consume me.”(Psalm 69) (2.14-17)

Religion and business had become mixed up, in a noisy confusion. It was the time of Passover, and large crowds were coming to Jerusalem. Coins needed to be changed, so that the proper ones could be used in the temple. Larger and smaller

animals were being sold, for richer and poorer sacrificial offerings. Much of this was the ordinary business of the temple, but one can presume that some people were making a great deal of money. As a result, no one who enters God's house can pray there. Jesus' complaint was simple: you are making a house of prayer into a marketplace — get out! Here too is a message for Lent: unclutter our lives, make a space within us that is not controlled by the needs and business of everyday life, a space in which to pray. If we are busy all the time, we cannot live and breathe and love.

This powerful scene is told in all four Gospels. Mark, Matthew, and Luke put this story near the end of their Gospels, as the conflict between Jesus and the authorities reaches its terrible climax. So why does John put it near the start of his Gospel and right after Cana? John gives a few clues that show us what he thinks this is really all about.

First, in purifying the Temple Jesus is showing us by a sign something of his own death and rising:

"Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days." They replied, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?" But the temple he had spoken of was his body. (2.19-21)

The temple is purified - and then destroyed and raised - as a symbol for what happens to Jesus, how God takes him apart and puts him together again, dying and rising. For us too, our place at the wedding feast begins with external purification, but that is only a sign for the internal purification, God clearing space within us, taking us apart and putting us together again. Purification happens first, and then everything else can follow. We just have to let Lent happen to us.

And then we have another clue: Jesus is skeptical about those who follow him merely because they have seen his signs:

> "Now while Jesus was still in Jerusalem at the Passover Festival, many people saw the signs he was performing and had faith in his name. But Jesus would not put his faith in them, for he knew them all. He did not need any testimony about humankind, for he knew what was in each human being. (2.23-25)

Merely showing up in Cana is not enough. Jesus is not fooled by the enthusiasm of people — "humans" (anthropoi) – for water made into wine, loaves multiplied, the sick healed and the dead raised. We see signs and are impressed, but Jesus

wants not merely to do easy things like changing water into wine or multiplying loaves, but rather hard things, like changing my heart and yours. He knows us, how hard it is to change us deep inside.

The rest of the Gospel is, it seems, all about Jesus' campaign to save the world, one person at a time. Lent 2021 is part of the same campaign: Jesus wants to make us new people, ready to celebrate the wedding feast, God's love among us. This is perhaps why there is yet another abrupt transition. What follows upon the purification of the Temple? Nothing but the night visit of Nicodemus, a human being who wants to know Jesus:

> "Now there was a human being (anthropos) among the Pharisees named Nicodemus. He was a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with you." (3.1-2)

Nicodemus is a good man who in secrecy wants to learn from Jesus. But on this night he does not understand Jesus' mysterious words about being "born again, born from above" (3.3), and so the scene ends inconclusively, nothing resolved. Perhaps Nicodemus comes many times to see Jesus, or not. But a great change is taking place: slowly he becomes the brave Pharisee who speaks out on behalf of Jesus (c 7), and then the very brave person who improbably risks everything at the darkest moment, when Jesus has died on the cross, by publicly bringing fragrant spices to prepare the body of Jesus for burial (c 19). He has finally chosen sides.

After purifying the temple and mystifying Nicodemus, Jesus goes on, engaging one person at a time: the woman at the well (c 4), the blind man (c 9), Lazarus (c 11), and amid the crowds enthralled by the multiplication of loaves in John 6, the remaining few who, like Peter, do not walk away from Jesus. And then there is Mary Magdalene at the tomb (c 20), awakened fully when Jesus simply calls her by name, "Mary." (It takes great purity of heart to be as simple as Mary.)

Lent is like this too: it is not really about us improving and purifying ourselves, but rather about the Jesus who seeks you and me out in 2021, to clean the Temple once agan, freeing our hearts of clutter and noise, rebuilding us as people ready for the eternal Cana, where the wine of human and divine love never runs dry. John 2, heard on this Third Sunday of Lent, is an invitation to the fullness of life — but by a path that begins in purification, the cleansing of the temples of our hearts and minds, that we might, like Nicodemus, be born again. Let us just say Yes.

(You can find an earlier version of this homily in the Mass posted for this weekend, here.)

Note: Last year, the Third Sunday of Lent, March 15, was the first weekend of the parish closures. I posted my first written homily that weekend, on the woman at the well (John 4). Today's homily is the 52nd in the series. As we reopen the parish and return to the Eucharist together, the time is coming to end this series, and so it will end, some time during the Easter season.

Between Memory and Hope, We Rejoice

March 12, 2021

This Sunday, the 4th Sunday of Lent, is by tradition Laetare Sunday – Rejoice Sunday, named in light of the old Latin opening prayer for this Mass:

"Rejoice, Jerusalem, and all who love her — be joyful, all who were in mourning — exult and be satisfied at her consoling breast…

This is a prayer indeed rich in consolation — rather explicitly evocative of the experience of coming home to one's mother after a long absence. For us in Lent 2021, this is a welcome note of joy, homecoming after our own year of exile.

It may seem odd, then, that we have today the one and only appearance of the Books of Chronicles in the Sunday three-year cycle of readings. I and II Chronicles are among the Biblical books least likely to be familiar to Christians. Ambitious in scope, they begin with Adam and Eve, and end with the decree of king Cyrus announcing that the Jews in exile may return to Jerusalem and Judea. On the surface, Chronicles simply a cleaned-up version of the more vivid stories we read in I and II Kings, now told in a more boring form, the ups and downs of Israel and Judea under good and bad kings moralized centuries later. (The old Greek title for these texts is revealing, the *Paralipomenon* (Summary or, more unkindly, "Leftovers"). But the primary point, it seems, is to remember all that has happened, reading experience — as individuals, as community — as a history of human folly and God's faithfulness, a sad but graced pattern that occurs again and again throughout history.

Today's reading is from the last chapter of II Chronicles, which recounts a few more disastrous kings — Jehoahaz, Eliakim (aka Jehoiakim), the boy king Jehoiachin, and Zedekiah. All are said to have mixed bad political and military skills — fighting against their powerful neighbors, the Egyptians and Assyrians, and losing again and again — with disregard for the word of God's prophets, notably Jeremiah:

> "All the leaders of the priests and the people became more and more unfaithful, following all the detestable practices of the nations and defiling the temple of the Lord, which he had consecrated in Jerusalem. The Lord, the God of their ancestors, sent word to them through his messengers again and again, because he had pity on his people and on his dwelling place. But they mocked God's messengers, despised his words and scoffed at his prophets until the wrath of the Lord was aroused against his people and there was no remedy. (II Chronicles 36.14-16)

King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon finally invades and thoroughly destroys Jerusalem. He tears down the city walls, and demolishes the holy Temple. Many are killed, and most citizens carried off to Babylon. It seems as if the history of the Jews has come to an ignoble end, in utter desolation. But this gloomy last chapter ends on a promising note:

> "In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah, the Lord moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm and also to put it in writing. "This said Cyrus king of Persia: 'All the kingdoms of the earth has the Lord God of the heaven given me, and He has charged me to build Him a temple in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever be among you of all His people, may the Lord his God be with him, and let him go up.'" (36.22-23 [verse 23 in the Robert Alter translation])

This is a comforting message, the exile is ending, and a remnant able to return home. And if these are the very last words of the Hebrew Bible — as is the case in one ancient ordering of its books — we are left hanging: "and let him go up." But what then?

If truth be told, what II Chronicles is *not* telling us is the most notable part. Chronicles is thought to have been written centuries later, well after the proclamation of Cyrus and the return of the people to Judea and Jerusalem. The Chronicler acts as if the decree has *just now* been given: the future is open, uncharted, yet to be written. But in fact more could said. He chose not to borrow, as he easily could have, from the Book of Ezra, which begins with this same proclamation and then recounts the return, the restoration of worship, etc. Chronicles tells us none of that happier history, rather leaving its readers hanging on edge, as if to ask themselves: What does happen when we get to return to Jerusalem? Readers had to think for themselves, to remember not only what happened according to Ezra, but also what was happening in their own time: have

we come home, have we prospered in our native place? According to the Chronicler, the return from exile is begins again in the time of the reader, it has to be written again, precisely where that reader is: after the Bible, the revelation grows by memory.

As for ourselves: We hear this message on this 4th Sunday of Lent, after a year that has been for us, our nation, our church, our world a devastation, a long period of isolation and deprivation and, for many of us, also a time to look rather helplessly on the extreme suffering and loss of others. And yet, right now, in Lent 2021, hope is on the horizon. Covid seems to be losing its grip; the vaccines are becoming more abundant; the economy may be recovering; schools are welcoming back students; parishes are carefully but with hope opening up again as Easter approaches; we can come together again.

As part of our Lenten observance, II Chronicles invites us to rejoice — Laetare! — not in the abstract, but to remember all those bad kings and military disasters, all the disasters of 2020, but also to look forward, as if our homecoming and restoration are happening right now. The point is not blandly to predict what will happen, but to keep our eyes open, to see what God has in store for us in the spring, the Lent, of 2021.

Knowing that Holy Week and Easter (April 4 this year) are just a few weeks away is not a mere fact of the calendar, that Easter always follows Lent, no surprise, nor just a sacred memory of what happened 2000 years ago. Let us imagine for a moment, with the Chronicler, how it would be were the Resurrection to happen anew for us in our time and place, if we too embrace our freedom and go up to Jerusalem. How shall we live and pray and love, a year from now or five years from now? Our redemption — Christ leading us from death to life — is a work in progress, alive as it happens again in our honest memories of a painful past and honest hopes for a future return home, to live anew in freedom:

> "Rejoice, Jerusalem, and all who love her — be joyful, all who were in mourning — exult and be satisfied at her consoling breast…

To See Jesus

March 19, 2021

On this Fifth Sunday of Lent we find ourselves in John 12, as the public ministry of Jesus comes to a close. He will be seen no more in public after this, except during his trial and when he was hanging on the cross. So there must be a lot to see in this last public scene.

It begins rather well, as Greeks — gentiles who perhaps are converts to Judaism — finally appear on the scene, eager to see Jesus:

> Now there were some Greeks among those who came up to worship at the festival. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, with a request. “Sir,” they said, “we would like to see Jesus.” Philip went to tell Andrew; Andrew and Philip in turn told Jesus. (12.20-22)

To see Jesus: a good thing to pray for, is it not? Indeed, the spiritual potency of seeing is a theme John returns to again and again. In John 9, and with a certain irony, it is only the man born blind who sees Jesus, while others are blind to the light shining right in front of them:

> Jesus said, “You see him right now; in fact, he is the one speaking with you.” Then the man said, “Lord, I believe,” and he worshiped him. Jesus said, “For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind.” (9.37-39)

Earlier, the Samaritan woman’s good instinct is not simply to tell her neighbors about Jesus, but to invite them to come and see him:

> Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back into the town and told her neighbors, “Come, see this man who told me everything I ever did!” (4.28-29)

And still earlier, on the first day of his ministry, seeing Jesus is basic and simple, as it was for the first disciples:

> “Come,” he replied, “and you will see.” So they came and they saw where he was living, and they spent that day with him. (1.39)

Indeed, at the very start of the Gospel John portrays Jesus as the God we cannot see now quite seeable among us:

> The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and

> truth… No one has ever seen God, except the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in the bosom of the Father — he has made him known. (1.14, 18)

To see Jesus: isn't that what the Incarnation is all about?

So it is a bit of a surprise that when the Greeks come to see Jesus, and Philip and Andrew intercede on their behalf, Jesus seems merely to change the subject. Indeed, the Greeks are not mentioned again. Do they ever get to see him? Are they just forgotten? I think that the point is a different one. It seems that now, at the end of his time before the public eye, Jesus is changing what it means to see and be seen. There is glory, yes, the intense light of God in the world: but this is an all-consuming light, not something for spectators. And so Jesus shifts images, talking instead about seeds that fall to ground and become hidden there, buried and, for a time, as if dead:

> The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life… (12.23-25)

Only when the grain germinates and breaks through the new soil and starts to rise up, do we realize it is alive. The story of the grain is the story of Jesus, and our story too: alive, hidden, dying, rising, new life… If we do not realize this — and how could we, first time around? — if we keep looking around for Jesus as someone simply to look at, we end up like people groping in a dark place:

> Jesus told them, “You are going to have the light just a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, before darkness overtakes you. Whoever walks in the dark does not know where they are going. Believe in the light while you have the light, so that you may become children of light.” (12.35-36)

To not see Jesus: It is no accident then that this central part of John 12 ends with Jesus disappearing from view:

> When he had finished speaking, Jesus left and hid himself from them. (12.36)

Only a few — including a few Greeks? — really understood that the time for spectatorship, merely by-standing, is over with. As Jesus prepares to die — to enter his glory — to see means to participate, not to watch from a safe distance.

Jesus is henceforth hidden from our eyes, unless we learn to see spiritually — to look not up but down, when he is washing their feet (John 13); at the judgment seat, when Pilate cries out “See this human being!” (John 19); when Mary hears her name called and sees Jesus right next to her at the tomb (John 20); when the disciples see Jesus cooking them breakfast on the shore (John 21).

To see Jesus in the last days of Lent means to stop trying to see him out there, somewhere. Think instead about the grain of wheat that falls to the ground, that it may die, and rise, and become our daily bread. See Jesus by finding Jesus where you are, in small acts of service, in the ordinary details of life, in all the small dyings and risings that have made our pandemic year. Search your mind and heart, feel the scars on your body, see your sisters and brothers, themselves like you, like Jesus — and there he will be.

(An earlier and somewhat different version of this written homily was delivered orally in the recorded parish Mass for this weekend, which can be found here.)

A Palm and a Fig

March 26, 2021

Jesus' final entry into Jerusalem, the signal event remembered on Palm Sunday, is an indelible part of the narrative of Holy Week, which begins with a kind of triumph and ends in a kind of disaster. We cannot but contrast how the crowds react at the beginning of the week, "Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!" (Mark 11.7-10)

and how they react at the week's end,

> "Do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews?" asked Pilate, knowing it was out of self-interest that the chief priests had handed Jesus over to him. But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have Pilate release Barabbas instead. "What shall I do, then, with the one you call the king of the Jews?" Pilate asked them. "Crucify him!" they shouted. "Why? What crime has he committed?" asked Pilate. But they shouted all the louder, "Crucify him!" Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them. He had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified. (15.9-15)

Such a contrast within one week! We do not know for certain that it was the same crowd which cheered and jeered, even if the likelihood is there. But surely we must share Pilate's question: *Why, indeed? What crime has he committed?"* We can blame the general plight of human fickleness, human hard-heartedness, but that is too generic. As usual Mark wants us to look deeper still. Mark 11 gives us a few clues as to what is really at stake, and for that we should look beyond the Palm Sunday scene we so vividly remember.

First, note that the entrance into the city does not end as gloriously as some surely would have expected. Jesus does not take over the Temple, drive out the Romans, or unseat Herod. Rather, the ending is an anticlimax:

"Jesus entered Jerusalem and went into the Temple courts. He looked around at everything, but since it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the Twelve. (11.11)

Perhaps Jerusalem and the Temple are not his destiny after all? So what is this Jesus up to? For this, note the scenes that follow in Mark 11 (passages never read in Holy Week), since they give a twist to the whole story. First, and very oddly, Jesus curses an innocent fig tree for not being ready for his visit:

"The next day as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry. Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to find out if it had any fruit. When he reached it, he found nothing but leaves, because it was not the season for figs. But he said to the tree, “May no one ever eat fruit from you again!” (11.12-14)

Why, if it is not the season for figs? And why mention the incident at all? No reason is given and then suddenly the scene shifts, as Jesus empties the Temple, which too was not ready for his visit:

"When he came back into Jerusalem, Jesus entered the Temple courts and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves, and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the Temple courts. And he taught them: “Is it not written: ‘My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations’? But you have made it ‘a den of thieves.’” (11.15-17)

Suddenly, danger flashes, hatred mixed with fear:

"The chief priests and the teachers of the law heard this and began looking for a way to kill him, for they feared him, because the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching. (11.18)

But this scene too ends indecisively, as if nothing has happened:

"When evening came, Jesus and his disciples went out of the city. (11.19)

That Jesus has left the city a second time seems mainly a set-up for Part Two of the tale of the fig tree:

"In the morning, as they went along, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots. Peter remembered and said to Jesus, “Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!” (11.20-21)

Jesus withers the fig tree even as he empties the Temple. Perhaps Mark thinks that this pairing is a sign that Jesus is finished with the Temple too, since he finds it bereft of prayer just as a barren tree is bereft of fruit. He may be after something else, and so the scene switches suddenly to a teaching on faith that pushes things still farther:

> "Have faith in God. Truly I tell you, if anyone says to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and does not doubt in their heart but believes that what they say will happen, it will be done for them. (11.22-23)

Which mountain gets thrown into the sea? Perhaps the Temple Mount itself? Faith now set against this holy mountain? If that is what Mark has in mind, no wonder that the people are confused and the leaders outraged: by the logic of Jesus' words, the Temple is put aside by faith — as if a mountain plunged into the sea, as if withered like a fig tree, neither was ready for the Lord at his arrival.

To close the scene, lest there be only these hints of endings and destruction, Jesus speaks of real prayer, simply and effective, words from the heart spoken right to God, words of hope and forgiveness that do can be uttered anywhere:

> "Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins. (11.24-25)

But perhaps these consoling words, spoken right at this point, make things worse. Visit Jerusalem and the Temple — and then leave them behind. Cease to be patient with those who profess piety and faith but do not actually have faith, do not actually pray. Instead, pray right where you can pray, just when you need to pray — and that is enough. Go directly to God, wait no longer on those who promise fruits but give none. No wonder they are annoyed and upset.

By this logic, it seems that Jesus may have terrified them all, impatient with the establishment and urging people to go straight to God in their times of need. Can't have that, can we? We too should be terrified: Jesus is changing *everything*. We may be tempted to put a stop to it, we think — and so the rest of this very sad week gets under way, ending on Calvary. (Easter still only a promise, over the horizon.)

All of this is conjecture, of course, but even so, we are still stuck with Pilate's question, "Why crucify him? What crime has he committed?" Let us take some time this Holy Week to think anew about what happened in Jerusalem those last days, making Pilate's tormented question a real question for us right now, in Holy Week 2021. We want peace and we yearn for the joy of Easter, but first let us try to

restore uncertainty, fear, and doubt to this hoy week that ends in death. It may be that we cannot really appreciate what is means to be with Jesus, to love him with an overflowing, endless love, if we cannot appreciate why he might also terrify us — all things made deeply, frighteningly new! — even to the point that *we* might be tempted to banish him from our lives.

(**This reflection** is in part indebted to an article by Paul Brooks Duff, “The March of the Divine Warrior and the Advent of the Greco-Roman King” [*Journal of Biblical Literature*, 1998])

Comment: I am acutely mindful that this reflection is a hard one, particularly as Palm Sunday this year falls on the first full day of Passover. Nothing said here, and nothing that Mark wrote, should in any way make us have less gratitude and deep love for the Jewish people, their enduring faith and brave witness over many centuries. Mark is talking not about “them” but about us, you and me.

Easter and the Uncertainties of Spring

April 2, 2021

It is April, springtime, but as I write on this bright and sunny afternoon (April 2, Good Friday), it is only 40 degrees here in Cambridge MA — not quite what I hope for when I hear "springtime." We have some new daffodils growing in our backyard, planted last fall by a Jesuit with us on sabbatical for the year. Unlike other daffodils in full bloom on nearby streets, ours have only peeked out, timidly, no flowers yet in sight. We should not be surprised. No spring is the same as any other, as if to please us on a strict schedule, no daffodil blooms before it is ready. Spring is a season of great promise, but an art as much as a science. We will just have to wait a while longer for those blooms in the yard.

April 4 is Easter, of course, still a bit out of season this year. For the second year in a row we are celebrating this greatest of our feasts during a pandemic. Thus far there have been 130 million cases of Covid 19 worldwide, and nearly 3 million deaths. In a way, things are better, we are no longer shut down entirely as we were last year. Our churches are open again — sort of, in a guarded, not yet familiar way, no more than 25% filled, some of us still hesitant to come, all of us wearing masks, sitting in chilly pews near open windows, participating in trimmed and truncated services, choirs excellent though reduced in size, loveliness sung through masks. Easter is here, but not all is well yet.

But perhaps this is fitting, because Easter is not just a happy ending. It really is a mystery: we have first to confront the empty tomb and the puzzle of loss – not even his body is to be found, a link to a happier past - before we meet the Christ who is alive again. The Gospel according to Mark, which we hear at the Vigil Mass on Holy Saturday night, gives us the earliest of the Gospel accounts of the resurrection of Jesus:

> "When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body. Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb and they asked each other, "Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?" But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they

> were alarmed. “Don’t be alarmed,” he said. “You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter, ‘He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.’” (Mark 16.1-7)

The reading at Mass ends there, but the next verse, the passage’s natural conclusion, is oddly missing from the Vigil reading:

> “Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid. (16.8)

There have been debates for many centuries about whether the Gospel according to Mark ends with this eighth verse, debates based on technical matters having to do with manuscripts, Mark’s word choices and the Markan style, etc. The scholarly consensus is that
16.8 is as close as we can get to the Gospel’s original ending. But what a strange way for it to end, without any encounter with the risen Christ or any word from him! Uncertainty as a sign of the resurrection, trembling as life conquers death: is this not our theme, at least this year? Good news — but the women have no idea what to say next.

Things have changed radically, death is all around us, and we really do not know where Jesus is to be found in all this, though we know by our deeper instincts that he is here. Like the good women who go to the tomb, we are given good news, but we are confused, tongue-tied, and so the preaching of the Gospel begins with us too notably inarticulate. What more honest place for the word of faith to begin?

The old order passes. We worry about the future of the Church, in an era of declining church attendance, after all our ecclesial scandals, amid signs that Rome still does not know understand us. Perhaps yet again, people will not return to church. And if I follow the news and then look in the mirror, I realize that I myself am not living out the message of Jesus in the way I should. It is Easter, but what we have right now is an empty tomb. Winter lingers, April is too cold, life returns only too slowly.

Uncertainty: yes, the Church will survive and grow, but we will never again be just as we were in 2019. This past year has changed us, as Catholics too. We’ve had to practice the faith on our own, to make sure it survives. We’ve had to spend the year improvising, figuring out how to live our family and civic and Catholic lives in improvised ways. We’ve had to ritualize our faith as best we can, embodying the Mass and reconciliation and community and the real presence of Christ in our own homes at our own times, in uncertain and new ways. No wonder,

like the women who hear the angel, we are a bit uncertain when we hear the words, "Happy Easter! He is risen as he said!"

Perhaps you know the *Four Quartets* of T. S. Eliot (1888-1965), the great American-British poet. At the end of the fourth, Little Gidding (itself named after a small country church), Eliot muses over the idea of endings and beginnings and reminds us that every beginning is an ending, every ending a new beginning:

> What we call the beginning is often the end
>
> And to make and end is to make a beginning.
>
> The end is where we start from….
>
> With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this Calling
>
> We shall not cease from exploration
>
> And the end of all our exploring
>
> Will be to arrive where we started
>
> And know the place for the first time.

Eliot is not easy to understand, though many have tried (see one good effort here), but the point of these lines (quoted here out of context of course), may in part be that in our lives, in a time of death and amid loss and near empty tombs, we keep facing endings; but then life begins again, and we gain the freedom to find our way back, to end up where we started, only different, surprised that we are still disciples of Christ even after his death, after three million Covid deaths worldwide, and diminishments for a million other dreary reasons.

Or listen to Eliot's own ending to *Little Gidding*, words borrowed in part from the *Showings* of the 14th century mystic Julian of Norwich:

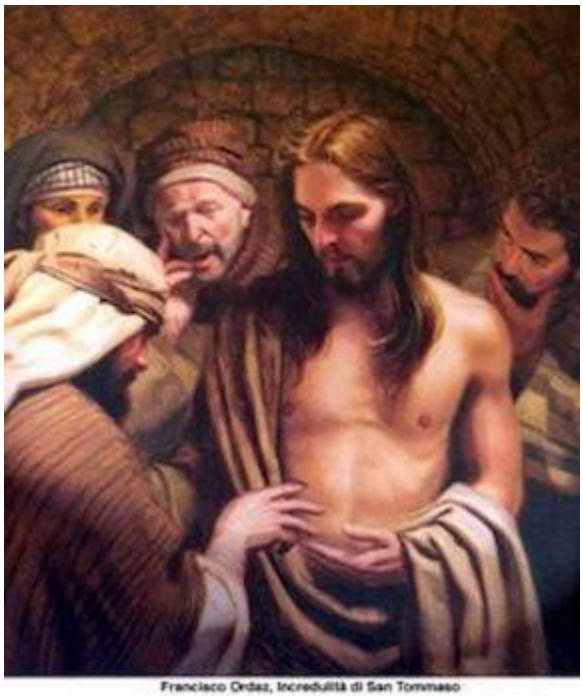
Quick now, here, now, always —
A condition of complete simplicity
(Costing not less than everything)
And all shall be well and
All manner of thing shall be well

> When the tongues of flames are in-folded
> Into the crowned knot of fire
> And the fire and the rose are one.

Maybe not roses but daffodils, sure to bloom sometime soon, though we can't say when: after all, hope in the resurrection is an art, not a science.

Hearing, Seeing, Touching the Risen Christ

April 9, 2021



Francisco Ordaz, Incredulità di San Tommaso

"Now Thomas (known also as the Twin), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord!” But he said to them, “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.”

"A week later his disciples were in the house again, and this time Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.”

> "Thomas said to him, “My Lord and my God!” Then Jesus told him, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” (John 20.24-29)

Poor Thomas. He wanted to see Jesus; he would not believe simply because his fellow disciples told him that they had seen him. *Blessed are we if we believe without seeing* is the first message we receive from this Gospel, and a good enough sermon might end there. But there is more: Thomas actually wanted not only to see Jesus, he wanted to touch Jesus intimately, putting his finger in the nail holes and his hand into the side of Jesus: not just as proof, I think, but also a way to reconnect with the Jesus who died and has now returned. Jesus says, Go ahead, do it, and perhaps he is not merely scolding Thomas, but inviting his touch. (Whether he actually does so, John does not say.)

Touching was already on the mind of the Gospel writers as they recounted the Resurrection events. Earlier in John 20, Jesus had said to Mary,

> "Do not touch me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. (20.17)

Had she tried to embrace him? We do not know, yet he seemed in a way to be leaving here, leaving her. Yet soon after that, when Jesus first visits the disciples

in the absence of Thomas, he displays the very wounds that Thomas wants to touch:

> "After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. (20.20)

In Luke's parallel account, Jesus explicitly invites physical contact:

> "They were startled and frightened, thinking they had seen a ghost. He said to them, “Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.” When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet." (Luke 24.37-40)

Did they touch him? It would seem so — why not? Seeing — and then touching, for a more intimate experience of the risen Christ.

In today’s confrontative scene, Jesus seems then to be taking Thomas seriously, offering Thomas the chance to do precisely what he was asking for:

> "Put your finger here. Look, see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe. (20.27)

When Thomas wanted contact more intimate than words and vision, he was unknowingly standing at the start of a long tradition that focused on the wounds of Christ. As we all know, on Mount Alverna, intimately close to the presence of the radiant crucified Lord, St. Francis of Assisi famously received the stigmata, the marks of the nails in his hands and feet, a long gash in his side. Vividly too (as I learned in the course of reading her with my students last week) in her famed *Herald of Divine Love* Gertrude of Helfta, a learned cloistered nun writing at the start of the 13th century, seems to have received interior, spiritual stigmata as a gift from Christ. But even more, she envisioned Christ as taking her hand and placing it in the wound in his side, a sign sealing their commitment to one another: "And immediately (in my nothingness) I saw you opening with both hands the wound in your deified heart, the Tabernacle of divine faithfulness and infallible truth. You commanded me to put my right hand into the wound.

> Then, contracting the opening of the wound in which my hand was now enclosed, you said: “See, I promise to keep intact the gifts which I have given you.” (*Herald of Divine Love* 2.20)

And so on, a few mystics in every century, touched by Christ, touch him and in remarkable ways share in his wounds.

But we are not medieval mystics, so what does this mean for us now, this interplay of hearing and seeing but also touching the risen Christ? First, we can think about our spiritual lives, and the metaphors we use. Is hearing

enough? Is it enough to see from a distance? Should we not also feel what we see and hear? What does it mean to experience the risen Christ?

Second, cherishing the wounds of the risen Christ can be a way to acknowledge and reverence our own wounds. Just this week Peter Wehner wrote for the New York Times a remarkable meditation on the wounds that remain visible even in the risen Christ, and in us too, even as we regain life and hope and love:

> "I find the concept that fractures in our lives can be redeemed and leveraged for good deeply moving. All things, even broken things, can be made new again, and sometimes they can be made even more beautiful. And they need not be hidden, in shadows or in shame. None of this means that people, if they had a choice, would endure the blast furnace of pain and loss, of trauma and shattered lives. It means only that even out of ashes beauty can emerge.

After our pandemic year, families shattered by untimely deaths, careers and studies put on hold, jobs lost, lives scarred in quiet ways: as survivors in small and large ways, we are invited also to an intimacy with Christ who is eternally marked by the suffering of his crucifixion, like him marked by the things that happen to us. We do this by a simple, honest acceptance of our lives, scarred by our own history and choices, by our sins and mistakes: marred and imperfect bodies — on which the death and resurrection of Christ are recorded, as if written in a holy book. He is risen, and we, touching his wounds as Thomas wanted to do, are enabled to be in touch with who we are, however scarred we may be.

And finally, we can turn a compassionate eye to the suffering around us. In 2013, Francis spoke this way on July 3, the feast of St. Thomas: "How can I find the wounds of Jesus today? I cannot see them as Thomas saw them. I find them in doing works of mercy, in giving to the body—to the body and to the soul, but I stress the body—of your injured brethren, for they are hungry, thirsty, naked, humiliated, slaves, in prison, in hospital. These are the wounds of Jesus in our day. (Pope Francis, July, 2013)

Just this March he again reminded us that there is no lack of wounds around us, and every wound is a wound of Christ:

> "It is more than ever important in our day that Christ's faithful people give witness to tenderness and compassion. Listening to the cry of the poor that resonates within us, allowing ourselves

> to be overwhelmed by the suffering of others and deciding to go out of our way to touch their wounds — which are the wounds of Christ — not only participates in the building of a better world, more a family, more evangelical, but it strengthens the Church in her mission to hasten the building of the Kingdom of God. (Pope Francis, in an address to Fidesco, a charitable organization)

The challenge, of course, is to take up this invitation, as much as we can, not only in the shadow of the cross, but also in light of the Resurrection: our role as witnesses, compassionately present as we can be, is to bring the hope of new life to people, even amid the wounds that scar their everyday lives.

And so Thomas, though a doubter — and as a doubter — actually got it right: to hear, to see, but also to touch the risen Christ gets us very deep into the meaning of the Resurrection.

He Got Up and Began to Dance

April 17, 2021

After the Resurrection, for a short time Jesus would come and go unannounced, suddenly appearing among his disciples, meeting them in unexpected places, sharing a meal with them. He would show them that he was real and present, that they could see and touch him. Our Gospel for this Third Sunday of Easter evokes yet again that most unusual period:

> "While they were still talking about what the disciples had seen, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.” They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. He said to them, “Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.” When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet. And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, “Do you have anything here to eat?” They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate it in their presence. (Luke 24.36-43)

How wonderful to be there in those special first days of the new age! But Luke does not want to us to spend our lives yearning to go back to that short and unique period. Luke 24 ends with a version of the Ascension, while the first chapters of his next book, the Acts of the Apostles, quickly move things forward: again, a telling of the Ascension (Acts 1) and of Pentecost, the outpouring of the Spirit (Acts 2). Things change; we now live in the age of the Spirit, breathing, speaking, healing in our lives, our words, our deeds.

In light of these grand developments, today’s first reading from Acts 3 seems a bit tame. It seems to be mainly a scolding, a sermon on repentance:

> "Peter said to the people: The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his servant Jesus. You handed him over to be killed, and you disowned him before Pilate, though he had decided to let him go. You disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you. You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this... Now, fellow Israelites, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your leaders. But this is how God fulfilled what he

> had foretold through all the prophets, saying that his Messiah would suffer. Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord. (Acts 3.13-15, 17-19)

A moral lesson, and we all can benefit from a reminder to repent and return. But if we think about it, there is more. Why is Peter saying these words — and to whom, on what occasion?

The obvious clue lies in Acts 3.16, the single verse omitted from the middle of Sunday's reading:

> "By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus' name and the faith that comes through him that has completely healed him, as you can all see. (3.16)

Who is "this man"? What happened to him? There is a back-story, on an ordinary day not long after Pentecost:

> "One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the time of prayer — at three in the afternoon. Now a man who was lame from birth was being carried to the temple gate called Beautiful, where he was put every day to beg from those going into the temple courts. When he saw Peter and John about to enter, he asked them for money. (3.1-13)

Instead of just passing by and looking the other way — are not beggars everywhere? Have we not seen that lame man a thousand times? — Peter and John intuit a new possibility now alive in them, and they stop:

> "Peter looked straight at him, as did John. Then Peter said, "Look at us!" So the man gave them his attention, expecting to get something from them. (3.4-5)

Because they have nothing to give the lame man, they give what is not theirs:

> "Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk. (3.6)

Peter does more, actions following words, grasping the man's hand and helping him to his feet for the first time in his life:

> "Taking him by the right hand, Peter helped him up, and instantly the man's feet and ankles became strong. (3.7)

The man is for the first time in his life upright, and remarkably he begins to jump, to dance, even as he joins Peter and John for prayer:

> "He jumped to his feet and began to walk. Then he went with them into the temple courts, walking and jumping, and praising God. (3.8)

The crowds notice this extraordinary event on an ordinary day, drop what they are doing, and hurry to where Peter and John are:

> "When all the people saw him walking and praising God, they recognized him as the same man who used to sit begging at the temple gate called Beautiful, and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him. While the man held on to Peter and John, all the people were astonished and came running to them in the place called Solomon's Colonnade. (3.9-11)

The next verse is the real introduction to today's reading:

> "When Peter saw this, he said to them: "Fellow Israelites, why does this surprise you? Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk?" (3.12)

Peter, surely filled with the Spirit and surely still marked by his years in the company of Jesus, preaches not morality in the abstract, or a timeless lesson of repentance for sin as a general truth, but right here and in this moment, he speaks to the miracle of this man, born lame, who now stands, jumps, dances. See what can be done, not just by Jesus during his ministry, but right now, if we trust and call upon his name. See what God can do for you, if you let the power of God touch you again. It is never too late to return, and to allow the Lord to help us to stand upright again. It is never too late to be healed, never too late to let go of the things that have crippled you and held you back: like "this man," you, my sisters and brothers, call up on the name of Jesus, who is in our midst, and then stand up, walk, jump and dance. Be alive in the Spirit of that Christ, join the Dance!

Peter has more to say, but the true end of this story comes only at the start of Acts

4, where Peter and John, all the more a threat to the authorities who thought they had put an end to the Jesus story, are thrown into prison, while “many who heard the message believed; so the number of those who believed grew to about five thousand.” (4.1-4) The community begins to grow, not simply by the Pentecost gift, but in a thousand small acts of taking notice, stopping to see and be seen by a person in trouble, calling on the name of Jesus not in nostalgia for a better past, but to face up to the needs of this very day.

The application for us is perhaps very obvious. 2021 may in many ways be a better year than 2020, but Covid 19 is not yet tamed, and the vaccines are abundant for some of us, impossible to get for so many in so many countries; more people are killed every day in mass shootings across our country, as happened just a day ago in Indianapolis; still more young men and boys of color, such as Daunte Wright (Brooklyn Center, Minnesota), aged 20, and Adam Toledo (Chicago, Illinois), aged 13, lie dead, shot and killed, victims of a system that too often by mistake or carelessness or intent kills rather than protects and heals. Here, not somewhere else, do the Peters and Johns and Marys and Elizabeths of today stop, pay attention, speak words that heal, extending hands that help us to get up again.

What can you and I do? We can remember with gratitude how Jesus died for us and rose again; how the risen Christ stayed among his disciples only long enough to give them a mission, to continue his ministry; how the Spirit came upon believers, that we might do what is really not ours to do — and then we can go about our daily business, at home and the office, in church and at school but also, like Peter and John, realize that it is up to us to stop, no longer taking the suffering of others for granted. The Resurrection, Ascension, and Pentecost all took place in a short period of time. But for 2000 years and right now, it is up to us to realize that we have nothing to give of our own, no silver and gold, but in Christ, we hold as our treasure a hope that is all about getting up and starting over again. You and I can

look into the eyes of a person in need, and be vulnerable to that person looking right back into our eyes — that we might help our needy sister or brother up off the ground, to jump, to dance, to praise the name of the Lord. The risen Christ is even now becoming more present, one person at a time, here, now.

(An earlier version of this homily was delivered live at the Mass recorded for this weekend.)

Being Saved, Being Community

April 23, 2021

On this 4th Sunday of Easter, our first reading is from Acts of the Apostles 4, and so continues the scene we visited last week. In Acts 3, Peter restored to full health a lame man, who with Peter's help got up, and jumped and danced. As Peter loudly declared, this healing was by the power of the name of Jesus:

"Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk. (Acts 3.6)

After that a crowd gathered, and Peter calls his listeners to conversion: get up, repent, return to the Lord — it is never too late.

As Acts 4 begins, however, Peter and John have been arrested, thrown into prison, then brought into court. In today's excerpt from Acts 4 Peter responds to the authorities who are calling him a disturber of the peace:

> "Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: "Rulers and elders of the people! If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a man who was lame and are being asked how he was healed, then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. Jesus is "'the stone you builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone.' (Psalm 118) Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved." (4.8-12)

This passage has often attracted attention because 4.12 is famous in considerations of Christian missionary work, as declaring that only by the name of Jesus can anyone be saved. As such, it stands alongside passages such as John 14.6: "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." Together, Acts 4.12 and John 14.6 have throughout history created a sense of urgency: those without Christ, those who do not turn to Jesus alone, cannot be saved.

But what does it mean to be saved? And who is not being saved? What does Peter think this means, on this particular day when he is addressing the Jewish leaders? It seems unlikely that Peter is using the occasion to state a new policy about the entirety of the peoples of the world in his day — or by extension, the

many billions of non-Christians today. In context, Peter is more simply challenging the authorities to turn back to the Lord, repent and accept this new power and new life that has come upon them: you cannot silence us, make us forget the man you crucified - indeed, you must turn to him if you are to be saved.

Proof? The man who had been born lame is still there: "This man stands before you healed!" Look at him, Peter cries out, and see that you also can be restored by allowing the Lord to work in your life. To be saved is to be healed, enabled to stand again on your own two feet.

But a greater sign is to follow, the gathering of those who have found their way to form a new community. After the authorities let him go, Peter returns (along with John and the previously lame man, I assume) to the small but growing Christian community. He reports what happened, and the people respond in a single voice:

> "When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. 'Sovereign Lord, you made the heavens and the earth and the sea, and everything in them… Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.' (4.24, 30)

The prayer is answered, the Spirit given again:

"After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly. (4.31)

But even this gift of the Spirit is only a beginning, not an end itself. What really matters is the extraordinary new community that emerges among those who take the faith seriously:

> "All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need. (4.32-35)

They too have no silver and gold, but they share what they have, breaking down all barriers: *this* is what salvation looks like, Luke seems to be telling us. Look around you, right where you are, see what being-saved is all about. The opposite to salvation is not damnation, but to be trapped in lonely isolation, fearful, self-protective, hiding behind the high walls we construct to keep others out. This a community of those saved and healed in Christ, not a community of those who envision of the damnation of everyone else.

And why have this reading today, in the middle of the Easter season? To be sure, we are not ready for a full realization of the perfect community portrayed in 4.32-35. (Luke knows this, since Acts 5, the very next chapter, begins with a scandal and several deaths. Take a look!)

But we are (still) on the way from Resurrection to Pentecost. The Resurrection, the name of Jesus, and the gift of the Spirit are about building communities here, where we live, counter to the divisions and exclusions of today's fearful and sometimes spiteful world. We too are invited to heal, and to allow ourselves to be healed. We too are called to stand on our own two feet, putting our lives back together, restoring communities of faith and opening them to new members who likewise have been restored and uplifted. In this country at least we are emerging from the pandemic (though now we must care for our sisters and brothers in every country devastated by a virus our wealth enables us to push back). Now is the time to trust in the name of Jesus and live by the Spirit, healing our communities, demonstrating that only when we can say that black lives matter do we really mean that all lives matter, bringing new life in Christ to our families and neighborhoods and schools — and to parishes such as Our Lady of Sorrows.

(This series of homilies is likely to end on Pentecost, May 23, after 60 homilies since the pandemic shut down the parishes in March 2020. FX)

Divine Life, Our Life

April 30, 2021

Springtime: things are growing everywhere as May begins, and so much of that new life and beauty simply a gift to us. We may do our part – planting, watering, fertilizing, protecting from bugs and rabbits – but what grows is in the end a miracle —the plants and flowers that grow from the seeds or from last fall's bulbs; a bit later, the tomato plants that grow large and, when pruned, eventually yield so many tomatoes in August. Life pulses through those slender green vines and branches, and the fruits are many and beautiful; what is alive, keeps growing, that there be more life.

John 15 tells us that our life in Christ is like that too, a miracle that happens because Christ is not simply a giver of life, but he is alive in us, pulsing through us. You know vineyards, the reading assumes, so don't take for granted the grapes you eat, the wine that you are drinking. Think of how that wine came to be — from the grapes, from the branch, from the vine cultivated over many years — and see that all of that is a great sign about God in us:

> "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while he prunes every branch that does bear fruit, so that it will be even more fruitful. (John 15.2)

Indeed, we live by a great mystery, our life streaming and pulsating the life of Christ:

> "I am the vine; you are the branches. (15.5a)

And so, at the foundation of anything we can imagine doing is the mystery of simple presence, God dwelling, abiding in us:

> *"Abide* in me, as I also *abide* in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must *abide* in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you *abide* in me. (15.4)

Jesus nuances this claim three times over, to make sure we get the point:

> *"If you abide in me* and I in you — you will bear much fruit. Apart from me you can do nothing.
>
> *"If you do not abide in me* — you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers. Such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned.
>
> *"If you abide in me and my words abide in you* — ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. (15.5b-7)

Abiding, dwelling, being present and as it were inside one another, without action or words: that in itself is a wonderful form of prayer — abide in Christ, let Christ abide in you. Remember the hymn, *Abide with me?* There are many settings of it, but try this one by Audrey Assad .

But where does this lead? Like flowers that blossom, grapes that ripen, love grows slowly, as the divine life wells up within us. God alive within us is the glory of God:

> "All this is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, that you show yourselves to be my disciples. (15.8)

Very beautiful indeed, God's glory in the fullness of human lives, words, deeds. But is any of this happening in *my* life or *your* life? Can all this be true, not just for the women and men who were Jesus' disciples on that Holy Thursday night when Jesus spoke of the vine and the branches, but for us too? An answer is at hand. When we doubt our capacity to overflow with the love of God in Christ, we can be encouraged by today's second reading, from the First Letter of John, Chapter 3. Here we are told that we can love and be generous with a certain graced recklessness:

> "If anyone has material possessions and sees a sister or brother in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth. (I John 3.17-18)

And how do we know that our deeds will matter? When so much is to be done, can we do anything that matters? But that is like the branch wondering if it can produce grapes — of course not, unless it is in a living connection with the vine. So too here in I John 3, the letter-writer tells us that confidence in our deeds is possible, because it is a matter of trusting our own hearts, and trusting God who is deeper than our hearts:

> "This is how we know that we belong to the truth and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence: Even if our hearts condemn us, we know that God is greater than our hearts, and God knows everything." (3.19-20)

Take heart, trust our hearts, where the Lord abides even now — bringing us to a fullness of life so abundant that we can share it with all those who are hungry and thirsty, alone and unloved, cut off in grief and loss. And all of this goes deep into the mystery of love, God's love and our love:

> "Love one another as I have loved you. (15.12)

But that miracle of overflowing love is the theme for next Sunday, as we continue reading John 15.

(An earlier version of this homily appears in this week's online Mass. This series of written homilies, begun in March 2020, will end on Pentecost Sunday.)

Like a Mother, God Loves Her Children

May 7, 2021

Two of our readings today stand in the tradition of St. John: our second reading is from I John 4, and our Gospel is a continuation in the Gospel of John 15, which told us last week about the vine and the branches. Both of today's passages speak of love as a generous self-giving sharing and care for one another in community. (This is the Greek agápē, more like charity, and different from romantic or erotic love.)

It is easy to say, "Love is what we need, love is the answer to our problems: love God, love one another," and who could object to such sentiments on the Mother's Day weekend? (Happy Mother's Day, all Moms!) To claim the importance of love, love above all, is not implausible, since we do experience the power of love, we need to be loved and to love. Every crisis, natural, medical, and human-made confirms the point: if there is no love, even justice falls short, even truth is not enough. But skeptics might say that talk of "love" is not enough in a hard and bitter world, that love on its own is weak, easly pushed to side by those who use their power to take action. But this is not the case, when our loves are strong and persistent, and grounded in reality, Reality.

This is what today's readings are for, to make clear that Reality, that love shows us what the world and God and ourselves are really like. John 15 clearly binds together the living and dynamic love of and in God — Father and Son forever loving one another as the very heart of the world — with love in community, enacted in our worlds:

> "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now abide in my love. If you keep my commands, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and abide in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love one other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends… This is my command: Love one other. (John 15.9-13, 17)

As we saw last week, earlier in John 15 Jesus had used the metaphor of the vine and the branches to show that our lives are inseparable from the life of God. Now we have the payoff: the vital flow of love from God as Father to Jesus as Son into the community of disciples is what makes community possible. To love one another is to live out the love of God in the world. To love one another is not merely an option, any more than faith in Jesus Christ is just an option for us. This is why love is commanded, as a way of life and practice, even in the hard times, even when we do not feel like loving at all. To love is a way of life — God's life, Christ's life, our life, and in the end cannot be stopped. St. Paul is right when in his *Letter to the Romans* he boasts on this very point,

> "Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8.35-39)

Yet I John 4 pushes even farther, because it tells us that when we love, we know who God is, because we are sharing in the life of God:

> "Beloved, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, **for God is love**. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. (I John 4.7-10)

God loves us, and that love is the reason for the coming of the Son into the world. God is all-powerful, but in a way, God cannot help but love us since, as John insists, God is love; God without love is like fire with light and heat. To love — experiencing what God has done for us in Christ — is to plunge into the reality of God, entering into God's inner life:

> "Dear friends, since God has so loved us, so we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us… And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. **God is love**. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. (I John 4.11-12, 16)

We have so many things to do in today's broken society and broken world, and we ourselves are needy in so many ways — but the ground for all that we do and need to do is love: love as personal, interactive, willing to give and receive, placing the needs of the other before one's own needs — arising from intimacy, fearless and trusting enough to allow for indwelling, abiding together. (See I Corinthians 13 for more on what love is like.) Yes, we need to be more just, more generous, more truth-telling, more brave in risking our lives, more stubborn in breaking up a status quo that makes some of us comfortable and leaves many other children of God poor, helpless, unvaccinated. But without love, nothing else is enough, and will eventually run dry, grow bitter, self-righteous. Only if we overflow with God's love, the reckless love of Christ, can we live truth and compassion in the long run, start to finish.

It is timely then that these readings for the 6th Sunday of Easter fall on Mother's Day. It is at least 100% clear that a mother's love is a very good, maybe the best model for the love that today's readings speak of. With no insult to fathers, can we not say that mothers embody love as self-giving, life-giving care for their children, from conception throughout birth and growing up, and indeed for an entire lifetime? And not simply love in general or love in words, but love in cleaning and cooking, in changing diapers, in wiping away tears and giving encouragement, in simple presence in hard times, in being there for your children as long as you live. A mother's love demonstrates for us the love of which John speaks in both readings.

And so while it is wonderful to speak of God as Father, we lose much if we cannot also see God as Mother, loving us from the beginning to end, giving us life, loving us even in those times when we do not return the love, giving us Her own flesh and blood. We are not used to praying to God as our Mother, we need to practice; we need to remind ourselves, "The God of Jesus Christ is my Mother too."

This may be for many an unusual idea, given how endlessly we hear the "God is our father" as if it is the only way to speak of God. But to call God our Mother is not unheard of, even at the heart of the Church. One example: in a beautiful passage remarkably found right at the Vatican website, the great medieval

mystic theologian Julian of Norwich richly weaves together her understanding of good and evil, love and protection, the Fatherhood and Motherhood of God, of Christ:

"It is a characteristic of God to overcome evil with good. Jesus Christ therefore, who himself overcame evil with good, is our true Mother. We received our 'Being' from Him and this is where His Maternity starts and with it comes the gentle Protection and Guard of Love which will never ceases to surround us. Just as God is our Father, so God is also our Mother…

It is as if to say, I am the power and the Goodness of the Father, I am the Wisdom of the Mother, I am the Light and the Grace which is blessed love, I am the Trinity, I am the Unity, I am the supreme Goodness of all kinds of things, I am the One who makes you love, I am the One who makes you desire, I am the never-ending fulfilment of all true desires…

Our highest Father, God Almighty, who is Being, has always known us and loved us: because of this knowledge, through his marvelous and deep charity and with the unanimous consent of the Blessed Trinity, He wanted the Second Person to become our Mother, our Brother, our Savior. It is thus logical that God, being our Father, be also our Mother. (From "Revelations of Divine Love," Julian of Norwich (1342-1416)

This is a passage worth re-reading many times, particularly on Mother's Day, on a Sunday when we are told that love is the life force of our faith, because, after all, **God is love**.

(Note: the third picture above is a Rohingya mother and child, refugees who had to flee persecution in Myanmar; the fourth picture shows us mothers protesting violence, last summer in Portland, Oregon.)

In-Between Sunday

May 14, 2021

The ten days from the feast of the Ascension to Pentecost (this year, May 13 to May 23) is a special, and rather odd, time in the history of the Christian community, at least as we hear about this period as reported by St. Luke in the Acts of the Apostles. Jesus has ascended into heaven forty days after the Resurrection, and will no more be present in a familiar form, even in his resurrected bodily form. The fiftieth day coincides more or less with the Jewish feast of Shavuot, a celebration both of the harvest and of the giving of the Torah at Sinai, and will become also the Christian feast of Pentecost. Only then will the Spirit descend on the community, breathing life and fire into those women and men gathered in the upper room, empowering them to speak in the name of Jesus. In-between, neither here nor there, they were left on their own, after the familiar Christ and before the coming Spirit.

A ten day waiting period in-between does not seem like a lot — except that those women and men did not know that it was only a ten day period. All Jesus had told to them was this:

> "On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. (Acts 1.4)

Wait: They knew that things would never be the same again, but what would come next, and when, was not clear to them. Waiting —for a bus, for the springtime, for an important phone call, for the end of a pandemic — can be very hard, but waiting for God is hard and mysterious, and requires a certain humility. By Luke’s calculation, while Jesus could have given the Spirit immediately, instead he had them watch and wait, to learn how to find him when he was not present. Wait for a week, or a month, or a year or ten years. Do not stop waiting.

So they go from the Mount of Olives, where the Ascension took place, back where they had come from:

> "The apostles returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives, a Sabbath day’s walk from the city. When they arrived, they went upstairs to the room where they were staying. (1.12-13a)

That is, they returned to the room where they had been, presumably where the Last Supper had taken place, and where Jesus had appeared to them after the Resurrection more than once. This is a good idea: when God is missing from our lives for a time, go back or think back to the times and places where God had been most present to you, go there, and you will still find scents and traces of the God you love, waiting for you.

And what did they do there? They prayed together:

> "Those present were Peter, John, James and Andrew; Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew; James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers. (1.13b-14)

They prayed there, in the in-between time, in that leftover place. They could have gone to the Temple, perhaps they did that; they could have begun breaking bread together, perhaps they did that too. The main thing though was that those women and men stayed together and prayed together, right where they were.

Perhaps it was that prayer which made them free and gave them clarity and honesty finally to reckon with what had happened. In that in-between time they were able to face up to the great shame that had come upon the community only a few weeks earlier: the betrayal of Jesus by Judas, one of their very own, one of Jesus' personally selected apostles. With this in mind, Peter speaks to the wider group of disciples who had known Jesus before the crucifixion:

> "On one of those days Peter stood up among the believers (a group numbering about a hundred and twenty) and said, "Sisters and brothers, the Scripture had to be fulfilled in which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through David concerning Judas, who served as guide for those who arrested Jesus. He was one of our number and shared in our ministry of service." (1.15-17)

Peter does nothing to soften the blow or romanticize what happened. He reminds everyone of what they surely knew, that Judas came to a gruesome end, perhaps in despair, alone and unloved:

> "With the payment he received for his wickedness, Judas bought a field; there he fell headlong, his body burst open and all his intestines spilled out. Everyone in Jerusalem heard about this, so they called that field in their language Akeldama, that is, Field of Blood. "It is written in the Book of Psalms, 'May his place be deserted; let there be no one to dwell in it.' (Psalm 69.25) (1.18-20a)

Brutal honesty; thus ends Judas, whom we knew and walked with since the beginning. Think about that for a while, Peter is saying.

Still, they had to move on, even in an uncertain interim period. What to do? Peter then quotes a second Psalm, and invites the community, even in the uncertain in-between time, to fill that sad vacancy as best they can, from among those who knew Jesus, who were there from the very beginning — the one simple but absolutely necessary requirement for servant leadership in those early days:

> Peter continued, “May another take his place of leadership.” (Psalm 109.8) Therefore it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus was living among us, beginning from John’s baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection.” (1.20b-22)

Peter — a leader but no authoritarian — did not presume to make a choice on his own, but rather in a very communal way. The community selected two men and then cast lots (perhaps like putting names in a hat and picking one out):

> So they nominated two men: Joseph called Barsabbas, also known as Justus, and Matthias. Then they prayed, “Lord, you know everyone’s heart. Show us which of these two you have chosen to take over this ministry of service and leadership in mission, which Judas left to go where he belongs.” Then they cast lots, and the lot fell to Matthias; so he was added to the eleven apostles. (1.23-26)

We never hear of Matthias again, and the impression we get is that Barsabbas would have been just as good a choice (and, I might add, so would one of the many women present!), but the point seems clear: after the betrayal and its sad follow-up, after admitting the inexcusable tragedy of betrayal, then do your best to fill the gap by choosing a new apostle from among yourselves. Narrow your choice to a few, roll the dice (so to speak) and let God make the final choice. Then get back to praying and waiting, for as long as it takes. Jesus is gone, the Spirit is yet to come, but you are still God’s people, so do the best you can, and God will be with you.

Are we not in a similar in-between period? Covid is ending but not over. Sure, despite terrible losses and lingering effects, we are mostly doing well, but other nations are doing horribly and the end is nowhere in sight. We wait for a better day. Since the murder of George Floyd we talk more about racism and the systemic violence imbedded in our society, and even those of us who are white glimpse injustice more clearly; but we cannot be sure yet that anything is really changing. We wait. We live amid still tumultuous political and cultural shifts in this country, and it is uncertain where we will be as a nation and

in our local communities in 2022 or 2024 or beyond. We wait. At this writing, the sad story of violence in Israel and Palestine continues. Will there ever be a just peace for all on this earth? We wait. We live in a Church that is changing greatly: the number of priests continues to decline, and so too the number of regular Mass attendees; scandals still erupt here and there; political and social issues divide us, since we obviously disagree among ourselves on the best ways to be good and honest Catholics in our diverse society. We wait.

We are called, on this in-between Sunday, to imagine ourselves at a loss, hopeful but somewhat orphaned, like those women and men who had seen Jesus return to the Father, and only knew vaguely that a Spirit would come, sooner or later. Let us try our best to imitate them, gathering, remembering, confessing what has gone wrong, but doing our best to make amends and find new leaders in our midst, from among those who can with humility say, “I have met Christ, Christ has called me to walk with him and I have tried my best,” even as we leave to God the final choice on real leadership in the Church.

This in-between Sunday is a gift and test, let us make the most of it.

(+ You can view an earlier version of this homily as preached in our weekend recorded Mass here.

+As previously announced a few times, this series, started when the pandemic hit in March 2020 and the churches were closed, will end on next Sunday, Pentecost. There are over 60 homilies in the series, and you can even read here what I wrote last year about this same reading.)

Many Voices, One Spirit

May 21, 2021

By tradition, St. Luke was a painter, and when we read the Gospel and Acts, we can guess why: his stories are so vivid, he brings scenes to life by his words. He not only tells us the story of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, but he shows it to us, in vivid scene after vivid scene, from the Annunciation and Nativity to the synagogue in Capernaum, to the parables of the lost sheep and the prodigal son, to the sad and poignant story of the Good Thief who died next to Jesus, and the two disciples with whom Jesus walked in their moment of despair after his death.

In Acts, he continues to paint with words, and today's first reading, for the great feast of Pentecost, is no exception:

"When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

"Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. Utterly amazed, they asked: "Aren't all these who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!" Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, "What does this mean?" Some, however, made fun of them and said, "They have had too much wine." (Acts of the Apostles 2.10-13)

But like many a fine painting, what we see first is just that, a general view. In an excellent albeit skeptical 1964 article, Frank W. Beare, a NT scholar, asks about some of the oddities here:

> 1. Which noise did the people hear? The wind of the Spirit, or the apostles' speaking in other tongues?
>
> 2. What would it have sounded like, were the apostles all speaking loudly in different languages, all at the same time? Just a lot of noise? Is that why some people thought they were all drunk?
>
> 3. In any case, the crowd was made of up of local people, plus many God-fearing Jews and converts from abroad who were actually settled in Jerusalem, not merely visiting for a few days. Surely they spoke Aramaic, and probably Greek. So what was the speaking in other tongues all about?

Beare concludes that the Pentecost story cannot really be about simultaneous translation or anything like that. So what is Luke showing us? When he steps forward and speaks, Peter gives a clue:

> "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:
>
> > 'In the last days it will be, God declares, I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. (2.14-18)

Touched by the Spirit, those men and women on whom the Spirit descended lost their inhibitions and came out of their shuttered rooms, ready at last to speak freely, their tongues loosened. Because their words were Spirit-enflamed, they could be understood by those who listen to them, all differences aside. That day the apostles did not mouth generalities, one size fits all. Rather, they spoke in their own voices, directly to their listeners as persons, in words and sentences they would understand in accord with their own inner voices. That is why the gift of the Spirit has to be given to each individual, not to the Church in general. This is why the Spirit comes not merely in fire or wind, or in a single flame, but as individual flames inspiring individual tongues, each person touched differently.

In this reading although Peter stands forth a spokesman for all, he is also just a good example of how any of the apostles would speak up eloquently. All of them had been touched by the Spirit, and surely those other apostles too spoke eloquently that day, in their own manner and style. I hope so. I cannot imagine John speaking as did Peter, or Andrew or James. Later in Acts we do hear the distinctive words of Stephen, the first martyr, in Acts 7, and of course very many words from Saul who became Paul. Indeed, in the early centuries of Christianity, we also find, outside the New Testament, the Acts of Philip, the Acts of Thomas, the Acts of John and of other apostles. The silence of the New Testament on the words of Mary, Mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene and other women should not mislead us into thinking that they did not speak publicly at all. Here too other books were composed, such as the Gospel according to Mary Magdalene. And who can believe that Mary, Mother of Jesus, spoke no more after her prayer of praise in Luke 2? Every recipient of the Spirit spoke in the Spirit, words of truth or justice or peace or beauty or love, every word needed.

In any case, when words of the Spirit are spoken in freedom and without fear, the effect is dramatic:

> "When the people heard Peter's words, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?” Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.” With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.”Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. (2.37-41)

Cut to the heart — ready to repent, to be baptized, to change their lives: 3,000 in a single day. Why, because each person heard words that spoke to their own hearts. Pentecost is not merely people speaking in the Spirit, it is about hearing in the Spirit too.

At Pentecost we are most likely not receiving the gift of speaking many languages, nor are we going to make loud sounds in the Spirit, speaking in tongues that cannot be understood by anyone without an interpreter (I Corinthians 12 and 14). As the Spirit comes yet again on the Church in May 2021, a Spirited tongue of fire helps you and me to find our own voices, to speak in our own language — which, in simplicity of heart, can speak directly to the hearts of others, person to person, heart to heart. If we try all to speak in one voice, or cede the speaking to one or two people, we will fail. But if we allow the Spirit to inspire us to speak up on our own, individually but for the sake of the community, then the Church will truly be born again. St. Paul catches this nicely in today's second reading:

> "Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. To one there is given through the Spirit a message of wisdom, to another a message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues,and to still another the interpretation of tongues. All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines. (I Corinthians 12.7-11)

Hearing the Word, and allowing it to become our living word too, spoken anew in your voice and mine, is so very important in the world in which we are living. The pandemic is still killing so many of our poorest and most vulnerable sisters and brothers around the world. But there is more: it was Pentecost a year ago that I found myself having to weave together the murder of George Floyd — "I can't breathe" — with the powerful wind and fire of the Spirit at Pentecost 2020. A year later, in the shadow of his death and all that followed, and in the gloom of other racial and racist incidents, perhaps we are making progress toward facing up to the sins of our society. But is it enough? We cannot say.

And although in writing today's words I did not mention the recent fighting in Israel and Gaza, those events too have shadowed what I have written. In the very same Jerusalem and Holy Land where Jews celebrated Shavuot and the early Christian

community was set on fire by the Spirit, we see how people of different faiths — even if all children of God — treat each other as enemies in a seemingly insoluble dispute. Will they – and we – find a way forward, speaking but also living justly, sharing what we have with every person in need? We cannot say.

But what is clear is that we will have no role to play — good intentions are not enough — unless we allow the fire of the Spirit to touch us and free up our tongues, that our words may be alive with truth, vulnerable to justice, and committed to love for as long as we live. Where the Spirit blows and sets on fire, in myriad small flames, there is hope for the future.

A Concluding Note: As I have mentioned in past weeks at the end of many of these written homilies, today's is the last in the series, 62 homilies in a series that began in March 2020. The parishes are open again, and Our Lady of Sorrows now has three regular weekend Masses, plus the recorded weekend Mass at the website every week. My purpose in helping to fill the gap has reached a natural conclusion, so it is best now to return the Spirit to the community, to you my readers. But thanks for reading, and for your encouraging comments over the past year. And, as they say, see you in church!