

The God of Our Understanding

Easter IV, May 12, 2019

In this morning's gospel text (John 10:22-30), the religious leaders then in power ask Jesus, "If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly – yes or no?" It seems like a reasonable enough request. But there is a problem.

Behind the question they are asking is a very fixed idea about **who** the Messiah is, **how** the Messiah will act, and exactly what the Messiah will accomplish. And this fixed idea about the Messiah is tied to yet another fixed idea about who God is. Their fixed ideas were convincing them that God was a Violent Conqueror and that God's Messiah would be his Warrior on earth, the one who would execute this violence on the ground. And this, in turn, changed how they saw themselves; it changed what it meant for them to be God's "chosen people." For **them** (*not for all Jews*), it was becoming less about holiness and more about having a status which entitled them to be avenged. It was about the God who was on **their** side being bigger and more ruthless than the gods of the Romans. And this had nothing to do with the Judaism of Jesus. The One whom he called 'Father' was nothing like this, nor was Jesus this kind of Messiah.

And so, everything that Jesus had taught and shown these leaders about the One he called 'Father' -- and about himself, the One the Father had sent – fell on deaf ears, because it didn't fit the profile of their fixed ideas. Jesus had taught and shown them Divine Love in action, the Love that cares for the most vulnerable no less than the powerful, the Love that freely extends itself not only to friends, but to enemies as well. And for these leaders, all of this just **did not match** the God of their understanding, not one bit. What Jesus was teaching and showing them was not intelligible to them; it went in one ear and out the other, because it was not what they expected, not what they wanted to hear. And so **they did not believe** – or, a better translation than "believe" – they did not **trust** in him, or in what he taught, or in how he acted, or in the One he called 'Father.'

But others did – the ones of whom he said, "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me."

The One whom Jesus called 'Father' was not a Violent Conqueror, but a Loving Shepherd, as Jesus himself was. And for **some**, this was music to their ears. The ones who could **hear** Jesus' voice and chose to **follow** him were the ones who could only trust in a God who was Love, a God who would lead them, not into the fields of war, but into fertile pastures, beside still waters – into places of safety, where they could heal, be well nourished, and strengthened as persons. They could not trust in a God who would further **divide** and **deadened** their souls, only in one who would **revive** them and **restore** them to integrity and peace. They understood, perhaps better than most, that in the course of this life, we **all** must walk through dark valleys. So they could only **trust** in a God who would always accompany them and abide with them there, a God who would free them from the fear of evil. This was the God they encountered in Jesus – in his presence, in his teachings, in his actions. This is why they **trusted** in Jesus, while those seeking a lesser god did not.

What wisdom for living can we take away from these events in the life of Jesus?

What happened in the exchange between Jesus and the religious leaders offers us a very important spiritual lesson.

We may find it easy to dismiss or reject these religious leaders and their vision of God as a Violent Conqueror, *but can we also **identify** with them and **sympathize** with their predicament?*

For each one of us in this mortal life, there is a **gap** between the God of our understanding and the Reality of God. We all see through a glass darkly, as St. Paul said. From the moment we are born, the dust of this world is always settling and collecting on the lens of our minds. Jesus comes into our lives, in a very fundamental sense, to “clean the lens” through which we perceive God, and ourselves, and others. He comes to **change** the God of our understanding, to **bring it ever closer** to the Reality of God he knows first-hand.

Not an easy task, as history reveals. Within the church, the God of our understanding – the God whom we have so often taken to be unquestionably true – has endorsed horrific evils. This was the God of the Crusades, the God of the Colonial Empires, the God who supported slavery and the residential schools in their aim to “civilize” the “savages.” When we reflect on these things, it is not so hard to sympathize with the religious leaders in today's gospel text – to see how very trapped they were by the violent, conquering God of their own understanding.

Thankfully for us in the church, we have been learning, over time, that we are not always right, that the God of our understanding is not necessarily the Reality of who God is. We have been learning this distinction the hard way – through being humbled, again and again, by the gravity of our errors. And, although we have not arrived, we truly **have** come a long way.

We are learning that the Bible is the story of how the God of Our Understanding has **evolved** over time. God is indeed always the same, “yesterday, today, and forever,” but the God of Our Understanding is always a work in progress. As Christians, we see in Jesus, the **ultimate** revelation of who God is. And yet, we have not arrived.

Thank God that, for the most part, we are no longer Crusaders. But there are more subtle ways in which we can suffer, and make others suffer, at the hands of a lesser God than the One revealed in Jesus. For example:

- Some Christians in our day suffer under the ever-watchful eye of a God who seems to enjoy condemning them and belittling them for their failure to comply with his demands. They live their lives in guilt and fear, rather than in grace and forgiving love. They need our help to grow beyond the God of their understanding.
- For other Christians in our day, God always seems to see eye-to-eye with them, and is always dead-set-against anyone who dares to disagree with them. These folks often don't seem to suffer much themselves, but those around them certainly do. They need our help to grow beyond the God of their understanding.

- Still others suffer with a God who is completely **inert**, who neither thinks, nor feels, nor wills, nor does anything at all, which ends up leaving these believers quite **bored** and without genuine hope for change. They need our help to grow beyond the God of their understanding.

In my experience here at St. John in the Wilderness, limited as it is, it's evident that we are a very life-giving community. That does not mean we are problem free. No human community is. What it means to me is that, by Divine Grace, and through much hard work and many challenges, **the God of our understanding is continuing to evolve**. I say this not to flatter our egos, but to help us better understand, and underscore for ourselves, ***what it is that actually makes a parish community successful in a spiritual sense.***

It is openness to the renewing work of Christ in our lives. It is allowing Christ to continually “wash the lens” of our hearts and minds with the Living Water of Divine Love, so that we can better perceive the Reality of who God is, who we ourselves are, and who our neighbors are. Clear perception is everything. This is the work that Christ comes to do in our lives. And yet, we must also be engaged in this work ourselves. We engage in it **inwardly** in our private, honest dialogues with God. We engage in it **outwardly** through how we relate to one another in the church, and to our other friends, and neighbors, and strangers, and enemies. We engage in it **both inwardly and outwardly** through our mindful participation in the Sacred Liturgy (as we are seeking to do together now). We often need help in each of these areas. Spiritual work is not easy work. But it is the most rewarding work that we can do in this life.

This morning, my prayer for us as a community is that, together with Christ, we will continue to do the work of keeping our inner lenses clean, so that the God of our understanding will continue to evolve, continue to become closer and closer to the Reality of God made present in Jesus. And, also, that we will not be shy to ask for help in the process.

Amen.

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