

## **FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME FEBRUARY 10, 2019**

A couple of weeks ago there was an article in more than one newspaper about a minister in a church who does not believe in God. The headline was meant to shock and create interest but the fine print offered some clarification. What the minister professes is a lack of a belief in Jesus being God, the Son of God. Now, we are who are Trinitarian Christians, would disagree with her. But, on reflection, I began to think that this minister is providing a service for us.

When someone asks you, "Who was Jesus Christ?" what is the first thing that comes to your mind? If you would say Jesus is God, the second person of the Trinity, you would be speaking the truth. But what does that mean? I am afraid that in this simple attestation we project on Jesus our image and thoughts about who God might be. And the truth is that no one really knows who God really is. God is mystery totally beyond our understanding. We have vague images of a God beyond us and this God is not really part of everyday reality. This vagueness has had the consequence in our culture of actually denying the transcendent in our lives. What we see is everything that is and perhaps some God outside of us occasionally interferes.

The vision that Isaiah has in our first reading is an image of the divine. This God is totally Other. Listen again, "I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty, and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him... And one called to another and said, 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.' The pivots on the threshold shook at the voices of those who called, and the house was filled with smoke." This description defies our comprehension. Isaiah says, "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips... but my eyes have seen the King, the Lords of hosts." This is something beyond us. Don't we rather tend to domesticate our God. I think Michelangelo has done a lot of harm in his description of God as an old man with a long beard on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. This image lies deep in our soul.

The sense of the transcendent is in our gospel today as well. Here Peter is overwhelmed by the holiness of Jesus. Peter falls on his knees and proclaims, "Lord, depart from me. For I am a sinful Man." As with Isaiah, to apprehend God is to know one's utter nothingness and sinfulness.

It was the same with Paul after his vision of the Christ on his conversion experience on the road to Damascus. We have been reading Paul's first letter to

the Corinthians these past weeks. Perhaps you remember the lines we heard in last Sunday's excerpt. After his beautiful hymn to love, Paul says, "We know only in part... but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. .... For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we shall see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known."

If these thoughts from Isaiah, Peter and Paul tend to confuse and discourage us, it is by going deeper into these scriptures that we find hope and joy, and real meaning to our lives. The Incarnation of God in the flesh changes everything. We need to find in the human face of Jesus before we can know what it means for him to be divine as well, and it in his humanness that we find who we truly are as human beings and how we are called to be divine.

In today's reading from First Corinthians, Paul puts us in touch with the earliest proclamation of the gospel. Here is the basic message. "For I handed on to you of first importance... that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day... and that he appeared to Peter, then to the twelve...." This is the paschal mystery. This is the heart of our faith. Christ died to be fully human with us in every way. But it was not the end. He was raised on the third day. And so it is that we become fully human like Jesus by embracing the paschal mystery in our every-day living and we will one day be raised up like Jesus.

Yes, the mystery of God totally transcends us, is totally beyond us. But God will not leave us in our fear, our shame, our sinfulness. Look, indeed how the three protagonists of today's readings act after they are exposed to the divine.

Isaiah is purified by his experience. His lips are cleansed and a seraph says that his guilt has departed and his sin is no more. "Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send?' and 'who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here am I. Send me.'"

When Peter wants to withdraw from the holiness of Jesus, he hears these words, "Do not be afraid. From now on you will be catching people." It seems that we have to be vulnerable, humble and truthful about our own weakness and ineptitude in order to be called by Jesus.

And Paul writes, “Last of all, as one untimely born, Christ appeared to me. For I am unfit to be called an apostle. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain.”

Brothers and sisters, this is really good news. Christ calls us to follow him, to enter into his humanity so that we may become divine like him. But he does not call us because we are perfect but because we can recognize our sinfulness and our need for God’s grace. This is a love affair in which our God lifts us up, embraces us and invites us into life with Jesus.

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