

FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT

APRIL 7, 2019

It doesn't take a lot of the power of our imagination to put ourselves into this gospel story. It is a story that is full of misery and mercy. The image of misery is this poor woman. We don't know her name. We don't know what her lifestyle has been. We don't know the man who has been involved with her in the act of adultery nor why he has not been apprehended.

All we know is this poor woman, who is terrified, trembling, exposed, and set up as a tool of the officials who are trying to put Jesus in a trap and get him to either fail to observe the Mosaic law if he does not condemn her, or condemn her to death himself.

What strength Jesus shows! What presence of mind, what character! He refuses to play their games. He is the image of mercy. He does not question the woman, does not question her about what she has done. But he does not condemn the officials either. He is able to see the goodness that lies even within them under the cloak of self-righteousness and judgment. He appeals to their better sense and their own awareness of being sinful people themselves.

I would like to know what Jesus wrote on the ground. Cecil B. DeMille in his movie had Jesus writing the sins of each of the attending accusers. Another writer has thought he may be penning the words of today's passage from Isaiah, "Behold I am about to do a new thing." In all events Jesus rises from the ground and finds the accusers have been slinking off in embarrassment. What a sense of presence. What strength Jesus shows. And what gentleness and tenderness he shows to the woman, "I do not condemn you. Go, and sin no more."

Is this your image of Jesus? Do you fear Jesus as judge? Or do you approach him as a soft and sappy, bleary-eyed character, maybe the one pictured in some Sacred Heart pictures? Do you really know Jesus? Know him as a human being, a man who loved, who feared, who felt rejected and betrayed and at times hatred? Has being a Christian been a path of growing to love Jesus as he loves you? Because you were told, when you first studied your faith, that Jesus is God, have you kept him at a distance and perhaps prayed to him, adored him, but not come to really know him?

Jesus is the human face of God. We have to take his humanity seriously, to come to know who is the God that he truly reveals. A loving God, a compassionate God, a vulnerable God, a God who is never far but is within us and with us.

So we need to know the gospels well in order to know Jesus. For Catholics raised without knowing and reading the Bible, this is still a challenge.

But there is more to knowing Jesus than studying his life and works. In our second reading, we hear Paul speaking about his relationship with Christ. I can almost hear Paul speaking through tears of joy and love.

“I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord... I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in death... I press on because Jesus has made me his own.”

--- To know Christ; to gain Christ; and to be found in him.”

How did Paul ever come to this intimate relationship with Christ, his mystical oneness with Christ? Remember that Paul never met Jesus of Nazareth. He never knew Jesus. He is like us in this regard. We remember Jesus and his words and deeds but we never met him.

But Paul encountered the risen, the universal, cosmic Christ, the Christ who fills all creation. He knew that Jesus' promise to remain with us all days was a reality. Jesus was with Paul. Paul remembered that Jesus said that what you do to the least of his brethren you do to him. And Paul encountered the risen Lord on the road to Damascus when the Christ said, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” These were not just words. They were real. Paul felt them.

To come to know the Christ as Paul knew him is to know that Jesus continues to be crucified in those who suffer, children who are abused, women who are raped, people who are rejected because of gender, religion, or any other difference.

To come to know Christ as Paul knew him is to know that Jesus rises with those who pour themselves out in love and compassion for the sake of others. The people who tender and help struggling immigrants fleeing violence on our border are signs of the risen Christ.

How do we know that the risen Christ is with us and we can know him in an intimate way? We can see it right here in this assembly. "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them." Christ is with us as his body, his brothers and sisters. And Christ shares himself with us in bread and wine, in a meal that shows us we are one with Him and with each other. In this assembly Jesus says to each of us, "I do not condemn you. Go and sin no more". Jesus says to us, "As I am, so you also will be." He tells us, as we come to be one with him, that we are to choose mercy over misery.

We are approaching the celebrations of the life-giving events of the suffering death and resurrection of the Christ. May we be one with Christ in these days that we may be one with him in the everyday events of our families, our community, our church, our world.

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