

Monastic Scribe XX: February 4, 2022

BE ANGRY... AND SIN NOT

You might remember the incident in a Jewish synagogue in Texas a few weeks ago when a Rabbi and three others were held hostage. They escaped safely for which we are thankful. What struck me, however, was the concern from so many Jews and Jewish groups around the country. A virtual service was held with twenty or so scattered musicians playing together in prayer. Many more watched. I felt inspired and impressed with the solidarity shown to these hostage people. And I asked myself would Christians show the same solidarity for some believers in distress? I suppose that in a small town the various churches might come together in common concern. Perhaps Jews have suffered so much persecution and rejection that they feel for one another; they also treasure the value of remembering. Christians have been assimilated into the fabric of America and take American life as the norm. Today Christians have become so polarized and separate that they are more apt to stress differences than similarities. The Catholic Church, in particular, is rent by strong ideological positions. Is there a schism happening?

Twenty-five years ago Cardinal Joseph Bernadin of Chicago instituted the Common Ground initiative to bring believers together in stressing the good they see in each other and try to understand the differences. These differences have often been over pro-life issues, but also war and peace, liturgical practices, the place of women, minority groups and homosexuals and others as well. Bernadin suggested we adopt a Consistent Ethic of pro-life to face all of the issues that confront life, and not just abortion. He was roundly criticized by many Catholics including some churchmen as Cardinal Bernard Law. Bernadin was seen as being too lax on abortion. Interestingly enough it is the very approach that Pope Francis advocates today.

Today the polarity has become worse. In a recent article in "Theological Studies," Cathleen Kaveny, theologian at Boston College, writes that the big difference then and now is the increased prevalence of anger. People can't just disagree, which can be healthy, but they make others into adversaries, call them names, berate them and question their Catholicism. I have gotten some of this personally in some angry responses to some of my blogs! Kaveny believes anger is associated with sorrow as people feel loss of what once was believed, professed, lived but has now changed.

Monastic Scribe XX: February 4, 2022

There is righteous anger, of course. Catholics have a right to be angry at bishops and priests for their part in the sexual abuse crisis and similar issues. This anger has to be owned and expressed appropriately. “Be angry and sin not” the scriptures say. “Do not let the sun go down on your anger.” The Bible is full of prophetic and rhetorical anger. It is a call to face ourselves and honestly be willing to change.

But there is also a lot of bad anger around these days. Conjoined to the stress of the COVID virus, problems of the economy and other stresses, people react especially in wanting someone to blame. There is little listening, a real listening that tries to understand what the other side believes. Jesus did not agree with everyone he encountered. But he treated them with respect and love and gave them the space and invitation to change.

I am sure there are many ways to deal with anger, including forgiveness which Jesus advocated. But my focus here is on members of a faith tradition that are at such animosity with each other. And so I return to the article by Cathleen Kaveny. She advocates moving through anger to lamentation. Prayers of lament do not dwell on guilt but on sorrow and loss. They do not look for someone to blame but own their own sense of loss. The prime example in the Bible is the Book of Lamentations, a short five-chapter book that follows the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah. These chapters simply turn over to God the lament over the destruction and exile of Jerusalem. Some psalms also express lament. They seek wholeness and not just healing. They accept some accountability for what has befallen them.

“How lonely sits the city that once was full of people! How like a widow she has become, she that was great among the nations! She weeps bitterly in the night, with tears on her cheeks; among all her lovers there is no one to comfort her.....”

(Lamentations. 1: 1-2)

Kaveny suggests that we gather together, e.g. to discuss the state of the church, and first pray a lament. We need to pursue the unity, love and solidarity that Jesus asked of us. She thinks churches and dioceses might have services of lamentation. Perhaps Synod groups might pray a lament before listening to each

Monastic Scribe XX: February 4, 2022

other. It is one positive suggestion to consider in our current malaise. At least, I think so.

You can let me know what you suggest by dropping me a line at joycet@glastonburyabbey.org Many thanks.

Fr. Timothy Joyce, OSB, STL

Please note that I do not speak on behalf of Glastonbury Abbey, the Archdiocese of Boston or the Catholic Church, though I hope my faith is in harmony with all these. Any error in judgment should be credited to me and not anyone else.