

Have you ever been to a lecture and listened to the question and answer period at the end? Some questions and the spontaneous answers can be very revelatory. But, sometimes, the questioner is more interested in impressing listeners with their own knowledge. This often happened with Jesus. Scribes, Sadducees and others asked him questions to try to trap him into saying something objectionable.

Most of us learned our religious tradition by questions and answers in the catechism. They usually weren't questions to real queries we yet had. Children ask more real questions out of curiosity, such as "Why is the sky blue? Did Adam and Eve have navels? Why didn't God save Jesus on the cross? Why are you crying, mommy?" We don't always have good answers but we take them seriously.

One way to read the Bible is to take the questions seriously. The Bible is full of questions. In the opening pages of Genesis, we hear God asking Adam and Eve, "Where are you?" What would we answer?

God's next question is "Who told you that you were naked?" This is followed by questions like "Where is your brother, Abel?" This continues through the Bible even to the gospels. Last Sunday we read of the first disciples directed by John the Baptist to seek Jesus.

Jesus turns to them following him and asks, "What do you seek?"

That's a real question for us. They evade the question and give another question, "Where do you abide?" Later in the gospel we get the really big question aimed at us, "Who do you say that I am?"

We read a snippet of Jonah today. It is really too short to get the full message of the story. Jonah's story is aimed at both children and adults. The story of Jonah swallowed by a whale is a good one for children. But there is a deeper adult meaning. God tells Jonah to preach repentance to the Ninevites. Today's reading reflects his actual preaching and the outcome. But, before that takes place, Jonah resists. He runs away. He doesn't want them to repent and he is angry at the prospect. God puts this question to Jonah, "Is it good for you to be angry?" Do we resent someone being forgiven and shown mercy when we think they should get their comeuppance? Do we prefer vengeance to forgiveness?

This Sunday has been declared, for a few years now, as Word of God Sunday by Pope Francis. He wants Catholics to get more engrossed in the Bible. It is central

to our Benedictine spirituality to practice Lectio Divina, the prayerful reflection on God's Word; to open our hearts to God's self-revelation and to struggle with its meaning. Many Catholics prefer miracles, relics and private devotions. I have suggested that starting with the questions in the Bible might get us more involved.

A recent article I read stated that Catholics, maybe especially American Catholics, resist Pope Francis in two areas: the first in embracing the scriptures; the second is his emphasis on God's mercy which we have seen in the Jonah story. The Pope is criticized for questioning whether there is anyone in hell. He actually said he did not know if there was anyone in hell and he hoped not! One of the problems is that we don't admit that we are sinners and so are constantly in need of the mercy of God. Without acknowledging our failures and shortcomings we tend to project them on other people and become very judgmental. Christ said he came to heal sinners and not the self-righteous. We dare not, we may feel, to be open, honest, vulnerable. Rather it is easy to blame and judge others.

So let's go back to the Bible and its questions. We need not fear our poor answers for that is where the grace of God can get into our lives. On the road to Emmaus following the Resurrection, Jesus appears to the two discouraged disciples who are fleeing Jerusalem. And, guess what, he asks them a question. "What are these words that you are hurling at each other while walking?" This allows them to share their grief, disappointment and personal hurt.

The gospel today gives us Jesus' first words to the disciples, "This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel." To repent means humility, honesty, vulnerability, trust in God's mercy. The verse in Psalm 95 is a good reminder, "Today if you hear God's voice, harden not your hearts."

Timothy J. Joyce, S.T.L., O.S.B.