

Readings for Tuesday after Epiphany

FIRST READING: 1 John 4:7-10

A reading from the first Letter of Saint John:

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is of God; everyone who loves is begotten by God and knows God. Whoever is without love does not know God, for God is love. In this way the love of God was revealed to us: God sent his only-begotten Son into the world so that we might have life through him. In this is love: not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as expiation for our sins.

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 72:1-2, 3-4, 7-8

Lord, every nation on earth will adore you.

O God, with your judgment endow the king, and with your justice, the king's son; He shall govern your people with justice and your afflicted ones with judgment.

Lord, every nation on earth will adore you.

The mountains shall yield peace for the people, and the hills justice. He shall defend the afflicted among the people, save the children of the poor.

Lord, every nation on earth will adore you.

Justice shall flower in his days, and profound peace, till the moon be no more. May he rule from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth.

Lord, every nation on earth will adore you.

GOSPEL: Mark 6:34-44

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to Mark:

When Jesus saw the vast crowd, his heart was moved with pity for them, for they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things. By now it was already late and his disciples approached him and said, "This is a deserted place and it is already very late. Dismiss them so that they can go to the surrounding farms and villages and buy themselves something to eat." He said to them in reply, "Give them some food yourselves." But they said to him, "Are we to buy two hundred days' wages worth of food and give it to them to eat?" He asked them, "How many loaves do you have? Go and see." And when they had found out they said, "Five loaves and two fish." So he gave orders to have them sit down in groups on the green grass. The people took their places in rows by hundreds and by fifties. Then, taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he said the blessing, broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; he also divided the two fish among them all. They all ate and were satisfied. And they picked up twelve wicker baskets full of fragments and what was left of the fish. Those who ate of the loaves were five thousand men.

The Gospel of the Lord.

Reflection for Tuesday after Epiphany

As Catholics most of us experience the scriptures as read at mass as opposed to reading them on our own. When the lessons are read at mass, often the passages begin with some sort of introduction. Sometimes the opening words get added to the text. Most of time if they begin with, "At that time," the passage is a continuation of an earlier passage. Sometimes if they begin with, "Jesus said," it is the way the editors of our lectionary put the passage into some sort of context. Jesus may address the crowds, disciples or the authorities. That context can help us to interpret Jesus preaching, teaching and actions. In the epistles, sometimes the introduction is, "Brothers and sisters," or, "Brethren."

With First John, the introduction is part of the text as written by the Johannine author. In the Revised New American translation that we use for the lectionary, "Beloved" is the translation of the Greek original text. Other translations use, "My dear friends." This implies, in translation, true intimacy and familiarity. The Johannine communities were very closely knit. There were based in the love of God. In today's passage John has told us that all love comes from God because God is love.

Love is God's greatest characteristic. The mission of Jesus as our savior revealed the extent of God's love. God was willing to die to save us, God's children, who do not deserve the gift. God is eternal, infinite and unconditional. The gift, or grace, of love has an unlimited source. God's gift of love is the heart of the gospel and the mission of Jesus. In any evangelical endeavor, God's love is good news. All doctrine, dogma, institution, commandment or law has God's love as its foundation. Without love we are a clanging gong, clashing symbol or empty noise. Sometimes, even with deep and fervent faith, we can forget the truth. We are human. Our salvation is God's love.

The first letter of John can be a challenge for us. We identify, as Catholics, with our doctrine and discipline. Jesus challenges us to love others. How do we view those who do not believe or practice our Catholic faith? Self-righteousness and judgment can be our human motive. It is easy to judge sinners. We may tell ourselves that our motive is love for them. Still, we judge. Jesus told us, "For as you judge others, so you will yourselves be judged, and whatever measure you deal out to others will be dealt to you." We too are sinners and we can forget our own sin.

First John agrees with another John, John Lennon. All we need is love. Love comes from God and love is God. The hallmarks of love are compassion, mercy and forgiveness. Jesus revealed them through his preaching, teaching, signs and wonders, ministry and mission. Jesus suffering and death was the way of the cross. Jesus' death saved us. In three days Jesus rose from death and is our path to life. The resurrection gave us the promise of eternal life. Our challenge is to give witness in life to Jesus gifts.

What do people need the most when we sin? God's love that leads to forgiveness. We all seek God's forgiveness when we sin. Jesus taught us, through his prayer, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." That part of the Our Father always gives me the willies. How well do I give others what I seek from God? My ability to love, unlike God, is limited. I pray that God will give me what I need; forgiveness when I fail and strength to be transformed. God's ability to love has no limits.

I have known many good people who do not believe in God. Sometimes they use the terms atheist or agnostic to describe themselves. From where does their capacity to love come? I believe what John has written. God works through us and despite us, whether we know it or not. Does God work in and through an unbeliever? It may be our judgment that blinds us to God's grace. God has made us all. There is only one human race created in God's image and likeness. All people are God's beloved children. God is infinite, eternal and unconditional; God has no limitation. If people have the capacity to love it is still God they share. I find this insight a powerful challenge and a great comfort. God can supply what we all lack. God sent Jesus to save all God's children.

I firmly believe that God's greatest miracle is the transformation of the human person. God saves the human race one person at a time. Jesus may have performed a miracle to feed five thousand people two thousand years ago. We may live like we expect Jesus to do it again and again. How hungry and possible starving people are there today? How can they be fed? To sit back and pray for a miracle may bring us closer to God but leave the hungry to starve. It is through our actions that God works. We have faith; we have love, so what do we share?

I have visited the deserts of the Southwest many times. I visited New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado and Utah. One never enters the desert without water. On a hike through heat, sun and aridity one wears sunscreen and a hat. I always wore long-sleeves too. I traveled with granola bars, water and a jacket. To visit the desert without these things is foolish. *Semper paratus* is a good motto for the wilderness. People who live in hot and dry places know this well.

There's a context to this Gospel. Jesus had sent the disciples out, two by two, to carry on Jesus' mission into the towns and villages. Herod had just beheaded John the Baptist. John's disciples had just laid the body in a tomb. The lads returned from mission and reported all that happened. Jesus then took them away to pray in the wilderness and to mourn over John's death. This was to be a retreat to revive body and spirit. They travelled by boat. When they arrived for rest, they found a vast, hungry crowd. When I have gone on retreat, it's been for several days. One lasted a month! I don't think that thirteen people would travel, by boat, into the wilderness with only five loaves and two fish. I had to shop twice for provisions for my month-long retreat. Bread, butter, salad, soup, peanut butter, canned food, granola, coffee and milk is what I lived on. It was just me. I had running water and air conditioning too. From my point of view, this story is a human tale not unlike mine.

Jesus did a few things to set the stage for his miracle. He had people divide into groups and sit down together. People sat, not as a mob, in communities of fifty to one hundred. They had to face one another, talk to one another and interact. I am sure that these people who lived near the desert knew the rules; never enter the wilderness without food and water. Their ancestors lived in that environment from beyond memory. Jesus collected food for himself, blessed it and gave it away to others to eat. What did that gesture show? It was a selfless action. Did that act as a catalyst for sharing? Share the gift that you are given. These were Middle Eastern people. I have experienced Middle Eastern people's hospitality; it can be very generous.

Sometimes the best way to interpret scripture is to look at our own lives and situations first. I don't interpret this miracle of Jesus to down-play his divinity, majesty or power as God. I tell it this way to emphasize Jesus second nature, his humanity. He is like us who live in the age of Jesus' Spirit. We carry on in his stead and Jesus promised that we will do greater things than he,

as promised in John's gospel. God will not solve our world's problems without us. God works through, with and in us. We cannot work without God. The greatest miracle that we can experience is God's transformation of each of us into the people God wants us to become. In this way we work to God's Kingdom, the return of Jesus and to live our witness of faith.

May you remain in good health. May you find patience and strength in God's Word. May you strive to keep others safe.

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