

Reading and Reflection for Thursday of the 17th Week of the Year

READING I Jeremiah 18, 1-6

A reading from the book of the prophet Jeremiah

This word came to Jeremiah from the Lord: Rise up, be off to the potter's house; there I will give you my message. I went down to the potter's house and there he was, working at the wheel. Whenever the object of clay which he was making turned out badly in his hand, he tried again, making of the clay another object of whatever sort he pleased. Then the word of the Lord came to me: Can I not do to you, house of Israel, as this potter has done? says the Lord. Indeed, like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, house of Israel.

The Word of the Lord.

Responsorial: Psalm 146, 1-2. 2-4. 5-6

Blest are they whose help is the God of Jacob.

Praise the Lord, O my soul; I will praise the Lord all my life; I will sing praise to my God while I live.

Blest are they whose help is the God of Jacob.

Put not your trust in princes, in man, in whom there is no salvation. When his spirit departs he returns to his earth; on that day his plans perish.

Blest are they whose help is the God of Jacob.

Happy he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord, his God. Who made heaven and earth, the sea and all that is in them.

Blest are they whose help is the God of Jacob.

GOSPEL Mt 13, 47-53

+ A reading from the holy gospel according to Matthew

Jesus said to the crowds: "The reign of God is also like a dragnet thrown into the lake, which collected all sorts of things. When it was full they hauled it ashore and sat down to put what was worthwhile into containers. What was useless they threw away. That is how it will be at the end of the world. Angels will go out and separate the wicked from the just and hurl the wicked into the fiery furnace, where they will wail and grind their teeth.

"Have you understood all this?" "Yes," they answered; to which he replied, "Every scribe who is learned in the reign of God is like the head of a household who can bring from his storeroom both the new and the old." When Jesus had finished this parable he moved on from that district.

The gospel of the Lord.

Reflection for Thursday of the 17th Week of the Year

Are the parable of the potter and the cross of Jesus fake news? Read lies for fake news. That would make God's Word in scripture bad news. God's Word is truth. Because we believe, we also trust God's Word in scripture. That makes it good news. If each of us will take the time to reflect on the course of our lives, the choices we've made, the people we've met, the events that happened, the things we've done and what ever serendipity of wonder or horror we've experienced can we not see the hand of God that has molded us into the people we've become? When I do take the time to reflect, I am filled with wonder and awe.

The cross of Jesus is at the heart of Christian faith. We as Catholics are Christians. Jesus was born a human being like us in all but sin. The Word became flesh and lived among us. God became one of us. Jesus lived a life of service for others and formed his followers to do the same. Thus the Church has lived to this day. Jesus suffered and died by crucifixion which was the execution death of a criminal. God died on the cross as an outlaw; he was, as God, the one who established the Law of Moses. Jesus was the sacrifice for the remission of sin as he died in our place. Jesus did not deserve that fate; we, as the ones who sin, did. Jesus chose this death as he followed God's plan which was set before the creation of the world. This was God's plan all along from the beginning.

Why has God shaped our lives the way God did and still does? Why did Jesus choose to die as a criminal? Why has Jesus death freed us all from the fate of our sins and forgiven us? The answer to these questions comes from John 3:16-17. "For God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not die but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to be its judge, but to be its savior." Since we're Catholics, it is just a bit more difficult to personalize this message. We find it harder than our Evangelical brethren to, "know Jesus as our personal savior." We can change the plural in the passages promise to singular and say, "For God loved me so much that he gave his only Son, so that I who believe in him may not die but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son to me to be my judge, but to be my savior." I first recited this passage in this way decades ago at the prompting of my spiritual director. She, herself, was a convert to Catholicism from Methodism through the Charismatic Movement. She returned to God just shy of her ninetieth birthday eight years ago. Her invitation to think that way, as I reflect back, may have been one of the greatest moments of God molding my life.

Love is the basis of God's *motus operandi*. God acts in love. Why? The first letter of John answers this well, "God is love." God can be wherever love exists. To Jesus the greatest commandment is, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with your entire mind. This is the greatest and the most important commandment. The second most important commandment is like it: Love your neighbor as you love yourself." This commandment, which is really three, can be misleading. If I cannot love myself, how can I love my neighbor? For what I detest in me I will detest in you. If I cannot love myself or you, how can I love God? There's an important, key element missing. In the first letter of John, 4:10 it also says, "This is what love is: it is not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his

Son to be the means by which our sins are forgiven.” When I look within myself whom do I see? I can see God; for God made me in God’s image and likeness. Likewise when I look at you I can see God, for God made you in God’s image and likeness. You and I are God’s beloved children. God’s command is to love one another. It is not to like one another. I have little choice of whom or what I like. I have always liked Brussels sprouts. Many people can’t stand them. At home, growing up there was no way my sister would eat them. I ate hers and was happy. Loving someone we don’t like can be a challenge. It means we first respect the person as a child of God and our sibling in Christ. We show compassion, for God offers each of us compassion. We show mercy because God has mercy on all of us. With God’s grace, it is a challenge we will meet.

Our lives can always be ambivalent. Having clarity of vision, as we live, is truly God’s gift. When Jesus asks the question, “Do you understand this?” when he’s finished his parables, I’m always tempted to respond, “Huh?” They can be pretty ambivalent too. Thereby they reflect our lives well. This particular parable seems ominous. Are God and the angels ready to cast us into the fiery furnace? We have all sinned and done wicked things. Nastiness is also part of our human profile. In the beginning when God created creation, what is the refrain in the book of Genesis? “God saw that it was good.” We start there. Each one of us was created in God’s image and likeness. We begin out of the goodness of God. Created of love, we are created good. God’s love is eternal and unconditional. We cannot lose God’s love by what we do. God’s love may even be stronger when we sin because we need God’s love more in our weakness. God made us with the propensity to sin as well. It was part of God’s plan for Jesus to be our savior.

Paul, when he prays for sinners he add the line, “of whom I am foremost.” God will work in God’s own way and in God’s own time. Thank God we all have God’s gift of life, being alive, and God’s gift of faith, being faithful. We pray that God will give the gift of faith to everyone. In terms of an eternity of hell, would we hurl someone we love into hell? Sometimes we may say, go to hell,” but do we actually mean for that to happen? What of God’s love, which is eternal and unconditional? Can God not love God’s creation? Would God, who is love, act out of hate? Not only has God made us, God shaped our live into people he wanted.

I see the sorting the angels do in another way. In forty two years of parish assignments and moving I have had to sort out, each time I’ve packed and unpacked, my stuff that way. When I look at my life through reflection, do I hang on to anger, pain and wrongs done to me? To be free of junk that hinders, I have to let it go. The process of releasing the anger and pain is what God calls forgiving. Wrong may never become right but love can heal. Whether it is God’s love or ours, which is the manifestation of God’s love within us, love heals. With this interpretation, I can answer Jesus’ question with a resounding, “Yes.” Each of us can be, with God’s grace, the head of our own household, our lives and bring from within us the new and the old. From our memories and our present experience we can know how God had molded us and recognize God’s presence.

Remain safe as you help keep others safe.

James D. Beath

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