

Commentary on the Gospel for Sun, Jul 14th 2013

PRE-PRAYERING

We prepare for special visitors in special ways. We desire to delight them, help them to feel comfortable. We ask ourselves and perhaps others about what foods they like, what activities would please them. These are visible signs of affection and intimacy.

In preparing for the liturgy we might be tempted to get our personal house in order so the Special Guest will be pleased, delighted, and feel welcomed. What is special about the Eucharistic Presence, the Visitor Who never goes away, Who has made his home in us, is that his delight is in us always. We prepare for the liturgy by being more attentive to welcoming him into those places in our personal lives where we would rather not have any visitors. We can pray with the dark corners, our hiding places and messiness, where God is waiting to welcome us.

REFLECTION

In our First Reading from the Book of Deuteronomy, Moses is completing his presenting of all the laws, customs and ordinances which the people of Israel are bound, covenanted, to observe. When they fulfill these, then the Lord will delight in the resulting prosperity of their fields, their cattle, and their fruitful bodies.

What we hear in today's First Reading are verses of comfort. Though the laws are many and detailed, they are not strange or disorienting to their minds and hearts. Moses has said that the Lord will continue to circumcise their hearts so that they all will know to whom they belong. These words of the Law are in a head-language and a heart vernacular so that there is no need for certain wise persons to interpret them. They are clear when thought about and comforting when experienced as a way of God's loving them and their responding lovingly to God.

Many Jews have the Word of God affixed to doorposts in a little box called a mezuzah, and can wear the Word of God in little cloth or leather pouches over their hearts and foreheads. These are called "Tefilin" emphasis on the second syllable. Moses declaims that these Laws will keep them close to God as God is close to them. They are not unreasonable, or violent to the human spirit.

The Gospel contains a beautiful and equally threatening parable. A scholar of the law asks Jesus a question, meant more as a beginning of a discussion than a simple request for information. Jesus, in his usual manner, answers a question with a question. The man knows well the dictates of the Law and responds correctly. According to the Book of Leviticus: 19, 18, loving one's neighbor is a sacred responsibility of the faithful Jewish person. So to extend the discussion and perhaps get the upper hand, the scholar asks the obvious question and Jesus takes it out of the scholar's hand and lays it on his heart.

A foreigner becomes the hero by placing himself in the vulnerable position of not being anybody's neighbor. The beaten man sets up the tension. The two religious figures, who do not tend to the man, heighten the heroism of the despised Samaritan. Jesus is telling this story to move from the Law to the Good News. The good news of the parable has several aspects.

Perhaps the two who pass by on the "opposite side" have their religious reasons. Their being faithful to their understanding of the laws of physical purity are righteous in their eyes. The good news of Jesus expressed in the parable is that "unlawful" love of the injured is the new and complete righteousness. Keeping our eyes and hearts open to the robbed is more blessed than keeping our eyes on keeping legal strictures.

A foreigner is moved with compassion flowing from his head and heart. Jesus is the compassionate stranger to our fallen, robbed-of-innocence humanity. Jesus is on "our side" and takes us in to the "inn" of his embrace after tending to our wounds through the Sacraments. "Oil" and "wine" are the healing "bandages" of his touch.

The good news is that we are relieved from our wondering what exactly we are to do when healed and sent back on our journeys. We are to "Go and do likewise." Selfishness in its various forms of protection, personal image, and indulgence, are very close to our minds and hearts. This interior law is not so far away or high above us. We do not need anybody to teach us how to be greedy, egocentric, or lazy. Nobody had to teach me on the day my mother put the frosting bowl between my sister and me, that if I smacked her with my spoon she would run crying to my mother and I could quickly scoop up all my unjust, but delightful desserts.

There are two forms of "good news". One is the selfishly good news that each of us can, by our own determination, walk on the "opposite" side. We can talk ourselves into not ignoring the wounded, the needy, the immigrant, but render our concern from a safe, distance. The other "good news" which we keep hearing and making the center of our lives invites, attracts and frees us is the selfless law of Jesus

which is warming to the heart when we hear it. The other “good news” of our ignoring-selves still remains in effect and is also seductive and operative. So again, the Gospel of Jesus puts us in tension. We ask also about just who is our neighbor whom we should care for and whom can we pass by and with whom not have to share our frosting. We would say that our neighbor is the one who will appreciate our gestures of generosity. Our neighbors are those whom we know. Our neighbors are those who are similar to us; think the way we do, act in accordance with our values. This is natural and warming to the heart and mind.

Jesus’ teaching is his whole life of including, embracing, and saving us in our being stripped, beaten by the ways of the world within and around us. He has brought us from our own being half-dead back to full life. As my mother had to do, Jesus keeps teaching us to share, to extend His compassion, and work to heal. In doing this, he lives through our stoppings and we really do put ourselves in position to receiving truly our just desserts.

When we hear or read such a parable we would, at times, want to pass by on the other side of Jesus pretending we haven’t heard or haven’t understood. This is one of those parables about which Mark Twain once commented about the whole New Testament, “That is one of those books you hope everybody else reads.”

“The sparrow finds a home and the swallow a nest for her young; by your altar, o Lord of host, my king and my God. Blessed are they who dwell in Your house, for ever singing Your praise.”

Larry Gillick, S.J.