

Commentary on the Gospel for Sun, Sep 15th 2013

PRE-PRAYERING

Recently, someone wrote me with two very good questions about our Catholic faith. I decided not to respond with very good answers, of course, but with my own question about what my answers will mean to his/her faith life. I wasn't being cruel or playing hard-to-get or even Jesuit Hide and Seek.

Faith allows and encourages reflections and questionings. I have some good ones myself. When I ask myself what the answers would mean, would do for me, the answer I get back is humbling. I want my brain to satisfy my longings for security or an increased sense of power. We are in a culture of questioning and getting immediate and satisfying answers. I am becoming more dissatisfied with answers and more attracted to the recognition that my personal intellect is too limited to encompass infinity.

As we approach the Eucharist this week, we might place our very good questions, necessary questions, before God and smile at our own poverty of mind. There are just some things in our older years, about which we are still too young to understand.

REFLECTION

Sometimes Moses gets his way with God. The people of God, Israel, got fed up with the God Who had failed to feed them up in the desert. Moses had gone up the mountain to listen to God and what he heard shocked him. His people, according to God, had abandoned the Saving-From-Egypt God for one they had made with their own hands.

We hear in this First Reading from Exodus God's decision to abandon Israel and to form a new nation founded upon Moses himself. Moses, in a sense, says that he has a better idea. He reminds God of two things. God has a history of power and care for Israel which would be forgotten. Then Moses reminds God of the promises made to the great servants of God, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, whose name was changed to Israel. In a sense, God has to be faithful to Israel as a nation, because God has revealed the Divine personality in a public, historical manner. God has to be faithful to God's being God by being mercifully faithful to Israel.

I have a Jesuit friend who, on the night of entering the Jesuit novitiate, when asked his favorite Gospel story, said that he liked the story of Christ's birth the best. He told me later that it was the only one he really knew was in the Gospel, but he didn't know which one.

Most of us recall easily the story of the Good Samaritan, The Feeding of the Five Thousand and of course, the Nativity. The Gospel for today is equally well-remembered, especially the third parable about the father-son split and the sibling rivalry at the end of the story. Parables are delightful to ponder there are so many different angles and possibilities of interpreting. For whom are these three portraits painted? To whom does Jesus direct the teaching or impact? The Tax Collectors and other sinners are finding these stories delightful and comfortable. The Pharisees and Scribes would be getting a little hot under their self-righteous collars as they hear such new teachings. We will know who we are by how comforting or challenging these parables are to us; are they a pain in the neck or a comfort to the heart?

I am attracted to my spinning all kinds of new thoughts about this old and familiar parable of the bad son and good father and jealous older brother. Many more gifted authors than myself have done this so well. I would rather imagine several differing out-plays, or afterwords which are not recorded here, but have been played out in the lives of many of us and continue to the present.

Using my rich imagination, I can picture the following which of course is not recorded in Luke's account. The Returnee has a great time with his friends the weekend after his being welcomed home. He neglects his stuffy older brother and pulls the same disappearing trick a week later. His father puts out the "No Vacancy" sign and changes the locks. The older son celebrates the father's return to normalcy and right-thinking from his flight into naiveté.

(Theme of parable) Humans are ultimately so weak that even God's mercy is limited. Severity is the only deterrent to moral fragility.

Perhaps the returning wanderer stays home, but constantly reminds his older brother of just how judgmental and righteous his older brother was upon his return. He knows and has received his forgiveness from his father, but cannot let go of being judged and criticized by his older sibling. The father continues comforting the older to be patient and the younger to forgive as he has been forgiven. The younger son finds it somewhat enjoyable to yank at the noose he has fashioned around his brother's neck.

(Theme) It is good to be forgiven, forgiving is optional. Love is a response, not a have-to.

The younger son, after all his friends have left, begins remembering the events of his recent past and those memories are so real that they outshine the father's forgiveness. The father keeps reminding him in word and gesture that the son is even closer to the father than before he left. The son knows this, but cannot feel it. Logic keeps a strict account and the son knows that he might go off again, or if not that, he knows he remains imperfect and so is not worthy. The older son has let go of his feelings and desires to reestablish fraternal affection. The father and older son create a support-group and have an intervention to which all his friends are invited. They use reason, stories from Scripture, put on dramatizations, tell their own stories, but nothing can convince the younger son to accept forgiveness. He knows, but he remembers and is embarrassed so much by his past.

(Theme) Being forgiven, as with being loved, is not reasonable. Forgiving self is different from forgetting. Holding on to one's identity, no matter how painful that grasping might be, is easier than letting go to the simple reception of being known and loved. It is a matter of pride then, personal sin is the greatest achievement, that is nobody ever sinned so greatly, and letting go of that prize is too humbling.

The Pharisees and Scribes listened and kept getting insulted no matter which way they turned it over. Their personal and cultic powerbases were being challenged and the image of a merciful God was eating away their strong hold on the role of the Law in relating to this God. It is interesting to picture with whom we identify at different times. As with dreams, we can be all of the characters, having all the responses. We are not always the younger son seeking forgiveness after having come to our senses. Sometimes we are the forgiving parent and others the unforgiving and self-righteous sibling. Whoever we are when we pray we will meet Jesus calming and calling us to receive His welcome.

“How precious is your mercy Oh God. The children of men seek shelter in the shadow of your wings.”

Larry Gillick, S.J.