

Commentary on the Gospel for Sat, Nov 14th 2015

The first words of today's first reading provide the basis for an ancient opening prayer of the Mass at Midnight in the Latin Liturgy of Christmas: "When peaceful stillness compassed everything and the night in its swift course was half spent, Your all-powerful Word, from heaven's royal throne bounded." The sense of this prayer was to "remind" God (and really, of course, us) of the Divine determination to make creation anew, preserving God's children from harm. The closing lines of the reading bring to us a glorious vision – not unlike Isaiah's of a "nation" sheltered by God's hand where the people are ranged about with great dignity (like great war horses) but as happy and delighted as spring lambs.

The Gospel passage from Luke includes a very interesting parable about asking for what we need or want. Often I hear people say "Why bother praying? If there is a God who knows all, then He knows what I want so I don't need to tell Him." Or on the other side, my students will sometimes say that they don't really believe there is a God who responds to prayer – look at all the suffering people whose prayers are not answered. But the witness of Luke's Gospel responds to both. The story of the unjust judge who gives up and gives in to the demanding widow - for all the wrong reasons, we conclude - is set in contrast to a God who desires justice and compassion for his chosen ones. If someone bad can do something good for all the wrong reasons, how much more will a truly just God do for us for all the right reasons. So we are to ask, and ask again, if we really want something.

In my own journey of faith I have discovered that whatever God does or does not "know" about me is God's business – not mine. So I have no right to assume that God (or anyone else for that matter) is going to operate on his knowledge what I need or I want if I don't express that vulnerability. Yes, God often provides (always provides!) more than I could ask or want – more than I know that I need – but if I think I really want something then I must ask for it. I might start by demanding it as my "right" but generally if I hear that starting to happen I realize that I am the petitioner, standing below the donor, not the reverse. St. Ignatius was very clear that naming, and claiming our desires tells us a great deal about ourselves and the truth about our heart's focus. But it is important to ask in humility and confidence.

If we are willing to be vulnerable and name what we think we want or need, that gives God room within us to illumine the depth of that desire and its truth. I may think I want some material thing but when I seriously pursue that desire in prayer I discover that my naming or imaging my desire is off kilter, and when I pray about it I open my inner life to God's grace for reshaping that desire into what will truly fill me with joy when fulfilled. I think I want something but if I understand it fully I really desire something else but did not know how to name it. Thus constant or repeated prayer awakens me to the truth of my desires – and the real longing that fills me for God's own self. Furthermore, if I really want something that desire may be planted there by God, so that I will be able to receive it.

When I name it I become a partner with God, taking some part of the responsibility for becoming who I am being recreated to be – one of God's Chosen Ones.

God delights in responding to us. God delights in our delight. In these last days of the Church year as we look toward the fullness of the New Creation, we are invited to want that above all.

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