

Commentary on the Gospel for Mon, Dec 14th 2015

Memorial of Saint John of the Cross, Priest and Doctor of the Church

My spiritual director Fr. Larry Gillick, SJ once told me about a conversation he had with Fr. Bernard Lonergan, the famous Canadian Jesuit theologian. The Toronto Jesuit community was celebrating the release of Fr. Lonergan's seminal theological work *Insight*. The blind Fr. Gillick pulled him aside, taking issue with the title. "Bernie! Christians don't want insight. They want sight!"

This story came back to me as I meditated on today's readings. For if nothing else, these readings are all about vision – specifically learning to see the world as God sees it. Such vision is a gift, a gift often bestowed on the margins of the community. Balaam – his name literally means "the seer of the gods" – is a diviner, a man entrusted with manipulating divine power through deciphering natural signs. Balaam is hired by Balak and the Moabites to curse Israel. But when he "raises his eyes," he is suddenly filled with God's spirit, and his intended curse is transformed into a blessing. His "eyes are unveiled," and he "sees what the Almighty sees." The curtain is pulled back; Balaam can see God's future redemption coming.

But when the star of Jacob actually rises, the horizon is still muddled. God's vision remains elusive, perhaps most so for those entrusted to be the authoritative visionaries of the community – namely the religious leaders of Israel. To echo the Psalmist, the "ways of the Lord" are often exceedingly hard to discern at the time, especially if such ways challenge our own sense of authority and our own expectations for how God works. God does not work through a strident desert preacher who eats locusts and honey! God does not work through a carpenter's son who claims divine authority while fraternizing with sinners!

The Kingdom of God is a matter of vision – learning to see the world as God sees it. It's a matter of allowing God to shape our vision, and then acting faithfully out of that vision. Advent is a beautiful if challenging season for such reflection. Amid the frenzy of final exams, Christmas shopping, and holiday parties, can we still see as God sees? Can we wait with the eager expectation of Israel and Balaam, hoping and trusting that God is continually at work for good in the world? And can we humbly accept that, to quote one of my favorite lines from St. Paul, we inevitably "see through a glass darkly," often limited to glimpses and insights? As Christmas approaches, may we train our eyes to see the humble face of the star of Jacob, whether in the soon-to-be-born child, the homeless family, the migrant, or the refugee. "Show us, Lord, your love, and grant us your salvation."

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