

Commentary on the Gospel for Mon, Jan 11th 2016

The question I find myself considering from today's readings is, "What sort of praise am I offering God?" It's an odd question. To begin with, it assumes I am offering praise and not some other communication. It can also imply conscious intention to praise God, which I certainly don't always have at the forefront of my mind. It definitely implies that there are different sorts of praise. And yet, that is the question that has stuck.

It comes from the psalm today, which I usually think of as "the priest psalm." This is not least because one of the priests at my parish growing up always referenced it after communion: "What shall we return to the Lord for all he has given us? Let us take the chalice of salvation, and call upon the name of the Lord." To recognize a gift, accept it, and give thanks is a form of praise. It certainly doesn't seem like much, especially considering the scope of the gift of all creation and Christ's sacrifice.

In the first reading, another line stuck with me on this question: "When the day came for Elkanah to offer sacrifice, he used to give a portion each to his wife Peninnah and to all her sons and daughters, but a double portion to Hannah because he loved her, though the LORD had made her barren." In this context, Hannah needed materials in order to praise. That wasn't what struck me, though. It was that Hannah does not have the means to praise until she receives it, and, because she has less and because she is loved, she receives the ability to praise even more. At the risk of comparing Elkanah to God, I believe that we receive all things from God, including our ability, and even desire, to praise God. These things are all gifts. When we praise God, we offer back what came from God to begin with. We can find joy by participation in that giving, by some miracle.

Furthermore, Hannah was not happy, yet still offered praise to God. Praise does not require happiness, though it's nice when the practice lines up with the emotion. Perhaps praise even when I'm not feeling cheery is still praise. I think of the line from the hymn: "Through all the tumult and the strife, I hear the music ringing. It sounds and echoes in my soul; how can I keep from singing?" Whether the words or music seem from the outside to be dry and dutiful, or mournful through tears, or reluctant, or boisterous, it is still praise. It is still forming me, reminding me that there are gifts to be thankful for and a Giver, reminding me to praise when I am happy, too.

The Gospel tells of Jesus calling his first disciples, who simply got up from their daily tasks and followed him. It doesn't mention the word "praise" anywhere, but that's what the disciples are doing. They accept God's invitation and spend their lives aligning themselves with God's will. They go as they are and let God lead them. Isn't that the same as constantly accepting the gift and giving it back? It is a lived praise, which includes both suffering and joy.

What sort of praise are you offering God?

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