

Commentary on the Gospel for Sat, Mar 12th 2016

“Truth”, said Flannery O’Connor, “does not change according to our ability to stomach it.”

Indeed coming around to accept a hard truth often takes time and slow digestion. It forces us to reorganize our world and make room for something which was not previously there. The end result, usually, is our having to conform ourselves to this new revelation, this new idea, this new belief; and we are changed.

Today’s Gospel begins with a division among the crowd about Jesus’ identity and ends with a division amongst the Pharisees and their guards who return empty handed after being sent out to apprehend Jesus. When questioned on this point they can only reply: “Never has anyone spoken like this man.” Their sense of unsettled bewilderment has all the hallmarks of having come face to face with a new truth; a new experience which, if slowly digested, will end in a fundamental change in their lives.

How could they go on serving their current masters? How could they go on in their present mode of life?

Contrasted with the honest confusion of the guards is the stubborn self-deception of their masters, the Pharisees. They utilize their theological sophistication and knowledge of the law to bring the weight of their religious authority against Jesus. Their argument, when examined, is an argument from authority; they don’t attempt to mount a reasonable challenge to Jesus’ words. Yet Nicodemus, himself a Pharisee, responds with a principle of the law which would have no person condemned before being properly assessed. With their argument increasingly falling apart, the Pharisees respond, almost desperately, with the statement that no prophet comes from Galilee; completely ignoring Nicodemus’ point.

Truth often causes a kind of division. When spoken, it forces a decision. Do we accept what we are hearing, or not?

Human beings were made for truth; we have a natural inclination to receive it. Saint Thomas Aquinas would say that truth is “the formal object of the intellect;” which is a technical way of saying that we were created to be the kind of things which naturally respond to the truth. And experience should bear this out for us.

How often in our own lives have we heard something which, while at first unsettling, contained some attractive element which we couldn’t ignore? Some piece of information or experience which drew us to it, almost in spite of itself?

I myself am a convert to Catholicism, and I remember the first time I considered the possibility of becoming Catholic. At the time it conflicted both with my view of the world and my view of how I would live my life. Yet there was something present in the idea which I could not ignore, some attractive element which could not be discarded.

I can easily identify with the experience of the guards in today’s Gospel; and I do remember being asked by a friend about my belief in Jesus during my conversion process. I don’t recall my exact

answer; but it might as well have been: “Never has anyone spoken like this man”.

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