

Commentary on the Gospel for Sat, May 6th 2017

As I write this reflection it is a wonderful spring day, with abundant sunshine and bright blue skies. Songbirds are filling the air with their intricate songs of joy, perennial plants are bursting with the energy and urgency of the growing season, and my fruit trees are laden with blossoms that bees are furiously pollinating in their own powerful commitment to the life of their colonies. Petals are falling off the last tulips, while the lilacs are filling the air with their sweet scent. Wild turkeys engage in their mating dances and puffery in our back yard, and fat robins are building nests for their coming young.

So on days such as this it is easy for me to reflect on all the good the Lord has done for me. Starting with the beauty and the mysteries of the world that surrounds me (How do the robins know when to return? Why do the hostas burst through the ground each year? And why do the deer like to eat them?), then moving to the life that is mine, and eventually focusing on each breath that I take, calms me and gives me a sense of connectedness to all created life that is about me.

But Jesus is not talking about this life, as pleasant as it is, when he is teaching the disciples in the passage from John. “It is the Spirit that gives life, while the flesh is of no avail.” It is so easy to lose sight of this, and so hard to accept it, as John relates when he states that many disciples returned to their former ways instead of continuing to follow Jesus and His path.

We can be seduced by the beauty we see, and become convinced of the importance of the life we live now. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, SJ, succinctly concluded “We are not human beings having a spiritual experience; we are spiritual beings having a human experience.” Christ teaches us that our real life, our true self, is not of this beautiful world and its wonders, but a spiritual existence that is unimaginably more wonderful than what we experience now.

If we believe that the spiritual life is infinitely more meaningful than this human experience, why then is it so difficult to detach ourselves from the human life and strive to prepare for the spiritual one to come? Why are we so many times like the disciples who returned to their former lives? Why can't we live the simple life of love that Jesus calls us to follow?

I don't know all the theological reasoning behind this reality, but a line from one of Billy Joel's songs captures it for me – “We're only human, we're supposed to make mistakes.” I think it is easy to get discouraged when we forget that making mistakes is in our nature. No matter how hard we try, we will keep sinning throughout our lives. We will be seduced by the beauty we see, the distractions that will tempt us, the focus on living in this world and we will regularly turn from trying to prepare for our next phase of existence in a spiritual world. As spiritual beings living a human experience we are also sinful people and mistake prone and distracted. Thus I think the ultimate lack of faith is in forgetting this reality, and giving up on trying to live more for the spiritual and less for the physical.

And so my prayer today is for the grace of a short memory for my sinfulness, the gift not to dwell on my shortcomings but to find solace in the times when I am more spiritual than physical, and the resolve to keep on keeping on.

