

HOMILY SUN 19-B (Homily 02)

“Transformative Faith”

(1 Kg 19:4-8; PS 34; Eph 4:30-5:2; Jn 6:41-51)

Have you ever heard the statement, “Some people are reacting against a God they have been taught wrongly about?”

Faith in Jesus can transform our lives and lead us to experience God.

Thomas Keating, renowned monk and spiritual writer, claims that we have it all upside down. Many people in our society have a notion of God that comes from their childhood training, leaving them with a God who is judgmental, strict, demanding, distant and aloof, and whose love must be earned. The reality is just the opposite – God is almost too present to us, in so many ordinary ways, that we miss it and seek him in the sensational or the extra-ordinary.

He uses a key quote from 1 Corinthians 1:22 to make his point: “For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.”

Both Jews and Gentiles believed in God, but they had an immature and inadequate notion of God, he maintains. The Jewish faith leaned on external observances and devotional practices to provide a certain religious identity, while the Greeks sought to rise above the pettiness of daily life through esoteric knowledge that would provide a certain feeling of moral superiority.

Jesus in the gospels is challenging the Jews to move beyond their limited notion of God to faith in Him as the only one who can reveal to them the true nature of the Father. He calls them to faith in him as Son of God, as the one who has seen the Father, as the source of eternal life, the one who can share with them the Father’s very being.

In doing so, Jesus also challenges us to move beyond childish notions of God that we might have inculcated growing up, to a more mature relationship with God as the very ground of our being, a God who wants to strip away all the false notions that we cling to for security and identity, so

that we can encounter the true God and in the process get to know our own true selves.

True Christian spirituality is that of the Cross, a spirituality that takes us beyond any danger of falling for the three temptations inherent in any other spirituality – of thinking that our well-being lies in survival and security; affection and approval or power and control. Those three false gods are symbolized by the desert temptations of possession, prestige and power that seduced the Israelites in the desert. Only Jesus was able to resist those temptations and stay faithful to his call to reveal the Father's love for us through the Cross. Only a spirituality based on the Cross frees us from any self-serving religiosity and narrow religion.

In the second reading, St. Paul builds on the challenge of faith put forward by Jesus. He shows how high the standard is, that is set by Jesus. Faith in Jesus is nothing less than transformative faith. For him, as it is for Keating, belief in Jesus is about transformative mysticism more so than soothing morality. To believe in Jesus is to enter into a transformation of one's lifestyle. One must let go of all violence that has plagued all world religions for centuries.

For St. Paul, Jesus has shown, finally and once and for all, that true religion and true spirituality is totally non-violent. We must let go of all aggression, bitterness, wrath, slander, together with all malice, he states. More than that, we must now live lives of unconditional love, forgiving all others as Christ has forgiven us.

This is the meaning of faith in Christ crucified, the ultimate act of selfless, forgiving love that reveals the depths of the Father's love for us and the very nature of the Father, who is totally non-violent and compassionate love.

Finally, in the first reading, the story of Elijah, who is on the run for speaking truth to power, takes us into a sacramental expression of faith in Christ and the Father revealed by Christ. This commitment to living life in Christ can best be sustained by belief in and participation in the Eucharist. As Elijah was nourished and strengthened by the food provided by an angel, so we are strengthened and nourished for the long haul by the heavenly food that is the Eucharist, the Body and Blood of Jesus, the crucified one, who promised to be with us to the end of time.

Matt Talbot is an example of someone who understood the message of the readings today. Talbot was an Irishman, addicted to alcohol. Before the days of Alcoholics Anonymous, he struggled and failed for years to overcome his addiction to alcohol. Finally he had a conversion experience, quit drinking, and began to go to daily mass for his strength and support. Basically, he replaced his addiction to alcohol with faith in Jesus as the Bread of Life. He spent the rest of his life in humble service of others who were struggling with the same addiction, and could be considered today the patron saint of all people in recovery.

The Eucharist that we celebrate today was instituted by Christ himself the night before he was to be crucified. At the Last Supper he spent an intimate evening with the Apostles, including the one who would betray him, loving them all to the very end. And he left them this way of celebrating his presence among them, to prepare them for what was to come. And so it is to this day. This is our heavenly food for the journey into following Jesus through our own Paschal Mysteries, helping us to find him in the ordinary trials of everyday life.

May our faith in Christ crucified transform us, as it did St. Paul, into mystics who live the mystery of unconditional, selfless love poured out in serving our brothers and sisters most in need of our compassion and love.