

The Face of God (4/10/16)

Acts 9: 1-16

Psalm 30

Rev. 5: 11-14

John 21: 1-19

Our Gospel reading for this morning takes place at the end of the Gospel of John., and it recounts an episode after the resurrection of our Lord. During that account we learn how Jesus told His disciples who'd been out fishing all night and hadn't had any luck, to cast their net on the other side of the boat, where sure enough they catch a boatload of fish.

It's presented as a miracle, although a fairly minor one as miracles go. And in fact it's one we've already seen before in another Gospel account.

If we turn to the Gospel of Luke (5: 1-11), we find that Our Lord gave the same command with the same result once before, years earlier. Here again Peter and the others had been out all night without catching anything; here again Our Lord tells them to cast the net on the other side of the boat; and again the nets are quickly filled to the bursting point.

But I think it's worth paying attention to the differences between the two stories, especially to the differences between the ways the disciples react to the miracle. Let me read the relevant portion from Luke's account:

"And when he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, 'Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch.' And Simon answered, 'Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets.' And when they had done this, they enclosed a large number of fish, and their nets were breaking...But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, 'Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.'

Peter's reaction here to the tremendous mystery posed by Christ is one of consternation: he's bewildered, even fearful, emotionally torn between the impulse to worship, on the one hand, and literally to flee on the other.

Now compare that to Simon's reaction in today's reading. This time he grabs some clothes and dives into the lake to get to shore quicker, probably to throw his arms around his friend.

What's happened between these two episodes contains a lesson I think for all of us.

At the beginning of the Gospel of John, John tells us in no uncertain terms who this Jesus of Nazareth really is.

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made. That which was made in him was life, and the life was the light of men."

Consider carefully what we're being told here. What Simon Peter began to get his first glimpse of that morning years ago was who this man sitting with him in the boat really was. He was with God in the beginning. It was only a glimpse, a premonition, an intuition, something he could not even have thought of forming into a conscious thought at that point. "All things were made through him." This boat, this lake, these fish, this sky overhead....even I myself. "All things were made through him."

No wonder the intuition shook him to his core, literally drove him to his knees.

But now move ahead to the second episode with the fish, and think about all that has happened between the times of the two episodes. Peter has followed Jesus all over Galilee and Judea. He has borne witness to His Lord healing multitudes of people with a word, to His command of the winds and the waves, to His multiplication of a few fish and barley loaves into food sufficient to feed thousands, to him casting out demons and bringing the dead to life.

And over and above all these and surpassing them by far, Peter has seen his Lord killed, crucified on a cross. He has seen him dead and buried. And then he has seen him, resurrected from the dead.

So that which had been to Peter a source of consternation bordering on terror while it was still only a vague glimpse, an unarticulated intuition, while it was still just the seed of an understanding, had turned into something else altogether, once that seed had blossomed into a full flower of understanding during the months and years of their companionship.

Jesus was the creative Word who was with God in the beginning of all things, who was so close and so much a part of God that He was God, who was the source of all creation. This was now clear to Peter, all of it. His eyes were fully opened.

But if the vague glimpse had been enough to shake him to the core, shouldn't the full and clear vision destroy him utterly. Hadn't we heard from the ancient Scriptures that no one can look on the Face of God and live?

But no. He isn't destroyed. He grabs a shirt, jumps in the lake, and starts swimming for shore!

Why is that? And what is there in it for us to learn?

It was only a couple of months ago that we were reading and thinking about the first miracle that Jesus accomplished, according to John's Gospel, a miracle that took place during a rural wedding ceremony at an out-of-the-way little farming community named Cana in Galilee, when Our Lord saved the day by providing wine from an unexpected source.

We emphasized then that this was the first demonstration our Lord provided of His true identity to his small band of new disciples, and we suggested that the reason why he chose this particularly unobtrusive miracle, performed in this out-of-the-way rural setting at a small country wedding, was because He was beginning to teach them the true meaning of His own divinity.

What He was starting to teach them was that the Divine, the spiritual, the true and deep reality of the Kingdom of Heaven, was not something out there, beyond the sky, ruled over by an intimidating law-giving and law-enforcing judge. By taking this beautiful, even heavenly earthly ceremony – a wedding – and bringing joy to it, He was showing them the face of a Father smiling on the life of His children, a face they could love instead of fear. He was giving them concrete

evidence that He was not there to judge their world, but to save it. The Christ had come to dwell among us in order to preserve and to elevate and to make us aware of and alive to the true wonder of the tremendous gift of life that God has bestowed on every one of us.

And I think that's the same message Our Lord was conveying while he waited on the shore for his disciples to come into sight from their night of fishing, where once again they had failed to catch anything.

John's account doesn't give us a lot of detail, but it allows us to reconstruct the scene. Christ is on the beach, cooking fish over a fire. What does that mean?

It means He had to gather some wood. So what we are allowed to picture is the Lord of all creation, picking up pieces of dried wood along the shoreline. Because it was still before sunrise, he probably examined each piece as he picked it up, to make sure it was dry, maybe to shake off any little slugs that might be clinging to it.

This is the face of God.

It means he had to find fire. That means the Lord of all creation gathered kindling and sat down with it, took out flint and stone and scraped them together to produce sparks, then leaned over and blew gently on the kindling, until the sparks blossomed into flame. Then he reached for the sticks he had gathered and fed the flames, exactly the same way you or I would do if we were out primitive camping somewhere.

This is the face of God.

It means he had some fish that he'd probably caught himself. But you can't just throw fish on the fire, can you?, and then offer that as a meal to your friends. Most of you here know more about fishing than I do, but even I know that if you don't clean the fish, they won't be very tasty. First you have gut the fish and get rid of the innards, and then you have to scale them, and then they're ready to go on the fire.

So what we are allowed to picture to ourselves is the Lord of the Universe, the one who was with God in the Beginning, the one through whom all that is came into existence, and to whom authority has been given to direct the destiny of every single human being, we are allowed and invited to picture to ourselves this divine man, risen from the dead, sitting in the semi-darkness of the early morning on a beach alone, gutting and scaling a few fish, so he can make breakfast for his friends., as the morning sun comes up over the horizon and casts its light on his face, on the face of God.

And it's in reflecting on that picture, I think, that we find the application of the meaning of that final, minor miracle of our Lord's ministry to our own lives and circumstances.

At the beginning of their acquaintance, Peter and the other disciples were prepared to be awed, to be awestruck. When they gave themselves to Jesus, it was with the expectation that they were making a sacrifice, that their own lives were worthless, that the values they held dear would be replaced by something else, something shiny and bright, something provided from a distant place, above the clouds, of which they could have no clear understanding. When Christ pointed out to Peter where to toss the net on that first occasion, that was the magical, mystical, inhuman power that Peter was prepared to bow down to and to worship.

But by the end of his time on earth, his disciples had learned that Christ's message was infinitely deeper. His message was that God is not out there, somewhere, but that God is here. And he did not come to condemn our lives, He came to bless them.

A famous preacher from the 19th Century named Frederick Maurice made the point this way: "(Jesus) was teaching them and us that the higher duty glorifies, instead of degrading, the lower; that every business in which men can be engaged is a calling and a ministry; that the bread which sustains the eternal life in man hallows the bread which sustains the life that is to pass away."

And so also, when our own eyes are first opened to who Christ truly is, it may be with a sense of awe bordering on panic, perhaps even despair at how impossibly distant He is, how unspeakably beyond and above. Perhaps our own spiritual

knees go weak when we truly absorb and appreciate the words of Paul in the first chapter of Colossians, where he described who Christ is: “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities – all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. (1: 15-18)

But along with His disciples, we also learn through the Gospel accounts that Christ did not come to replace the essential elements of human life, he came to bless them. He came to bless getting married and working and cooking meals for your friends. We learn from the Gospel accounts that our God is not some remote majestic Overlord, waiting in fearsome silent judgment for for his subjects to measure up to his unfathomable standards.

No indeed. Our God came to us, and lived with us, and worked with us, and ate and slept and cried and even died with us. He was and is, and always will be, one of us. If we should walk through those church doors after service and find Our Lord and Savior in the narthex, we have nothing to fear. He’ll probably be eating a doughnut hole, because, you see, he has already blessed this church service, this morning.

And so, Father God, we take a moment here at the end to turn to you in humble adoration, not of your majestic power but of your majestic love. We thank you that you have not rejected the lives that you yourself provided us, but that you have taught us to hallow them, by sending your son, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, to live a life like our own.