

**Fifth Sunday of Lent – Year B
21 March 2021**

“But others said, ‘An angel has spoken to him’”

In the very first essay he ever published, Bishop Robert Barron expressed his concern about “beige Catholicism,” which he defined as “a Church that had allowed its distinctive colors to be muted and its sharp edges dulled.” In other words, “beige Catholicism” is a faith that is uncomfortable or embarrassed about many of its traditional doctrinal and moral teachings, unappreciative of its own gifts and heritage, a faith that is ultimately boring, dull, watered down, and uninspiring.

This is the type of faith that the Lord criticizes in the Book of Revelation. In his letter to the Laodiceans, Jesus harshly rebukes that complacent church: “I know your deeds; I know that you are neither hot nor cold. How I wish you were one or the other—hot or cold! But because you are lukewarm, neither hot nor cold, I will vomit you out of my mouth!” We should tremble lest the Lord ever rebuke us like that!

In today’s Gospel passage from John, we find evidence for just such a lukewarm and “beige” faith. In response to Jesus’ prayer, “Father, glorify your name,” there came a voice “from heaven, ‘I have glorified it and will glorify it again.’” As is often the case when humanity hears the Word of God, those who heard the sound from heaven were divided. John tells us, “The crowd there heard it and said it was thunder; but others said, ‘An angel has spoken to him.’”

Now, in order to better understand this difference of perception, we first need to know who was in the crowd. The episode in today’s Gospel apparently occurred on Palm Sunday, shortly after Jesus triumphantly entered Jerusalem with that crowd declaring, “Hosanna!

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, the king of Israel.”

The crowd also included many of those who had recently witnessed Jesus raise Lazarus from the dead. Thus the crowd seemed to be made up of enthusiastic, excited people eager to welcome the renowned rabbi and miracle worker—very possibly the Messiah himself. But less than a week later, the crowd turned on him and, egged on by their religious leaders, demanded that Jesus be crucified.

The first warnings signs of that betrayal can be seen in today’s Gospel. When the Father spoke from heaven, most of the crowd did not even recognize his voice, assuming that the voice from heaven was just thunder. They lacked the ears of faith. Later in the week, when Pilate displayed Jesus with the words, “Behold the man,” the crowd lacked the eyes of faith to see that the man before them was the Son of Man and Son of God, the Suffering Servant and the Lamb of God. They didn’t recognize the Word of God when spoken from heaven on Palm Sunday and they didn’t recognize the Word of God whipped and bleeding before their eyes on Good Friday. If that crowd had faith initially, it was not a repentant faith truly sensitive to God’s presence among them. Their faith was at best “beige,” no more than luke-warm.

Perhaps the best Scriptural definition of faith can be found in the letter to the Hebrews: “Faith is confident assurance concerning what we hope for, and conviction about things we do not see.” Did the crowd who met Jesus on Palm Sunday have that kind of faith? Given their failure to discern the Word of God spoken from heaven, apparently not. They had faith only as long as Jesus was popular and acclaimed, as long as he was feeding thousands and raising the dead, as long as it was convenient and cost nothing. With their luke-warm, half-hearted faith,

they went out to welcome him, just in case he *was* the Messiah, not because they had confident assurance and conviction that he was. They were hedging their bets, rather than committing their lives to Jesus.

Is that the kind of faith we have—luke-warm, beige, dilute? Are we hedging our bets when we come to Mass or give to the poor, hoping that our minimal efforts will be enough just in case there actually is a God who actually does hold us responsible for what we've done and not done? Or do we come to church, worship God, serve the poor, and try to love our enemies because we are in love with God, because we have a passionate faith in the One who is willing to forgive our every offense, who died on the Cross for us, and who longs to share his own life with us for all eternity? *That* is the type of faith we should pray for.

If we have a deep and passionate faith, it should change *everything*, it should illuminate *everything*, in our lives. Stepping out in profound faith is like Dorothy stepping out of her gray and battered farm-house into the stunning beauty and clarity of Oz. Seen through the lens of faith, our lives and this world are brilliant, dynamic, and inspiring because it's where we can meet and love, not the Wizard of Oz, but the Lord of the Universe—and it's where he longs to meet us!

Such faith means that when we look at the world around us, we don't see the chaotic and accidental results of mindless processes and random events which inexplicably began 13 billion years ago. Instead, we see a universe set in motion and held in existence each moment by a creative, loving, and powerful God who calls to us through his artistry. When we enter into marriage in faith, we don't see just a mutually beneficial social contract, but rather a covenant which mirrors God's deep love for his bride, the Church. When our priest lifts the bread and

wine and speaks the words of consecration, we don't just see a symbol of Jesus Christ; we see his actual body and blood, soul and divinity. In faith, we have a confident assurance and conviction about these truths.

Now some might claim that we are just swapping out the beige-tinted lenses of a weak faith for the rose-colored glasses of *false* faith. Nothing could be further from the truth. The lens of faith is crystal clear, not tinted with deceptive hues, not darkened by doubt or scratched with skepticism. Instead, faith allows us to see reality as it truly is. Remember that Dorothy's journey through Oz was no picnic. Yes, it was stunningly beautiful—with a yellow brick road and an emerald city and ruby slippers—but it was also crowded with adversity. There was a wicked witch, malicious monkeys, terrifying trees and a weak-willed wizard. Dorothy and her companions ran a gauntlet of evil, but battled courageously, lovingly, intelligently, and hopefully.

Just like Oz, our real world is full of beauty and sin, delight and struggle. Only with faith can we discern all of that, and then still persevere and eventually reach the heavenly homeland. Like those members of the crowd who heard and recognized the heavenly voice, God speaks to us, reveals himself to us, so that we can discern his presence, but we have to be paying attention. We have to long for intimacy with him, we have to long for and ask for a deeper faith. As the distraught father of a possessed boy cried out to Jesus elsewhere in the Gospels, "I believe; help my unbelief!"

In today's first reading, Jeremiah promises that God will write his law on our hearts, and in Psalm 51, the psalmist asks God to create a clean heart in him. Our faith is strengthened through this mutual relationship—when we ask God in sincerity and truth to give us a new

heart, he will. When we ask him to deepen our faith, he will...but we must do our part. We must seek to get rid of the obstacles to faith in our lives—with sin being the most obvious one. That’s why receiving the Sacrament of Reconciliation can be so important during this penitential season of Lent. It allows us to renew or update the prescription for our lens of faith; it allows us to wipe the grime and dust away and see God’s presence in the world in a clear and focused way. The sacrament helps us fine-tune our spiritual hearing aids so that we can hear God more clearly and more regularly.

Earlier, I suggested Oz as a metaphor for a vision of life infused by faith. Now let me suggest another—stained glass windows. The great stained glass windows of the medieval cathedrals were designed specifically to communicate the mysteries of God and salvation history to the faithful. The brilliant colors and crisp, sharp edges of those glass pieces, just like the ones in our own church, serve to lift the heart and mind up to God, helping us to see and hear him more clearly. Now recall Bishop Barron’s words—a beige Catholicism is one “that ha[s] allowed its distinctive colors to be muted and its sharp edges dulled.” I suspect that none of you would want to see our stained glass windows here in church tarnished in that way. Similarly, we should never allow our faith to become dull and blunt, muted and shadowed. So, whenever you walk into Church and genuflect before the Blessed Sacrament, also take a moment to take in the beauty of those stained glass windows, a reflection of the beauty of God, and a metaphor for a vibrant faith. Ask God to deepen and strengthen your faith. Look up at those windows and pray, “Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!”