

August 23, 2020 Only God Knows Homily: “For who has known the mind of God or who has been His counselor? (Rom. 11:35)

In years past, it was rather commonplace to hear the phrase “only God knows” (or “Heaven knows”) spoken by a devout person of faith. The speaker humbly acknowledges his ignorance of a particular subject, and wisely defers to the all-knowing God who alone has the answers. In our secular age, God is seldom mentioned unless his Holy Name is profaned.

The late Franciscan priest, Father Benedict Groeschel, once shared an anecdote about the time he and a distinguished friend, a rabbi, visited the home of a Jewish couple who had recently suffered the death of their young son in a tragic accident. He was killed by a drunken driver. On the front steps the rabbi turned to the priest and requested that he remain silent in the presence of the grieving parents and offer no attempt to answer the inevitable question, “why?” Death is a profound mystery. One can only pray. Only God knows the reason why. We must place our trust and hope in Divine Providence. God knows better!

Our life is filled with many unanswered questions with no ready-made answers. God is a deep mystery. He is infinite without beginning or end and “wholly other”, not like us who are limited in so many ways. God is beyond our understanding. The bible calls him the Hidden God who dwells in unapproachable light. The wisest of rabbis insisted that anyone who thinks they know what is in God’s mind is a fool. They may have been inspired by the words of the prophet Isaiah: “Who has directed the spirit of the Lord, or instructed him as his counselor? Whom did he consult to gain knowledge? Who taught him the path of judgment, or showed him the way of understanding?” (Is. 40: 13-14)

One of the truly fascinating figures of the bible is Job. Blest with enormous wealth, an abundance of property and a large family, Job has every reason to be grateful. But he loses everything... his possessions, his family and his health. He can no longer understand God and begins to quarrel with him. As expected, he cries out, “Why me?” Yet in the end he realizes he must recognize that no one can dispute with God. No one can understand him. Yes, he questioned, but he did not lose his faith. “I have dealt with great things that I do not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I cannot know.”

In today’s epistle (Rom. 11:33-36), Paul sings a hymn of praise to God’s inscrutable wisdom and his unsearchable ways. He stands in awe and wonder before the mystery of God. Paul bemoans the failure of his people to embrace Jesus as their long awaited Messiah. He writes, “I have great anguish and sorrow and constant anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and separated from Christ for the sake of my brothers”. (Rom. 9:2-3) Only God knows why his people rejected Him.

Why did God choose the Jews to be the chosen people? Why did he allow his Divine Son to be brutally tortured and crucified? Why did God choose me to be a priest? All are mysteries. We live in the realm of mystery. Again, only God knows.

In the early days of my priestly ministry, I was called upon to give the “Last Rites” to a dying Filipino doctor who worked at Albany Medical Center. He peppered me with questions. “Why me?” he asked. “I am a young doctor with a family. It seems unfair that my life should be taken away so early in life. And

what is to become of my young children? They will soon be without their father?" In reply, I said that even if I were to answer his question with intelligence and wisdom, he would still unlikely be satisfied or comforted. He agreed. To walk with faith is a daily challenge. However, I am pleased to share good news that the sacrament of the sick and dying brought him some comfort and an increase in faith at the end of his life. He died a holy death.

There is a memorable story from the lives of the Desert Fathers. One day some pilgrims came to see Anthony of Egypt, a monk renowned for his holiness and learning. In the midst of the group was an aged monk named Joseph. Anthony put them to a test. He quoted a text from the Scripture and, beginning with the youngest of the group, he asked what it meant.

Each gave his own opinion.

But to each one he said, "You have not understood it". Last of all he said to Abbot Joseph, "How do you interpret it?" Joseph replied, "I do not know".

"Indeed", cried Anthony. "Joseph has found the way, for he said I do not know"

"For who has known the mind of God or been his counselor?"

Amen!