



Homily for 2/10/2019

5th Sunday Ordinary Time, Year C

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The Primacy of the Transcendent: God Is a Lion

One of the greatest distortions of modern Christianity is what I would call ‘Buddy Jesus’. Now, don’t get me wrong. Jesus did, in fact, call us friends. He does desire an intense and intimate relationship with us. But what I call ‘Buddy Jesus’ is the mistake that God is in reality just a teddy bear that can do no harm and exists solely for our comfort and pleasure. Now, the fact that God desires to be our friend can only be Good News if there were a possibility that He might have been our enemy. Or - more closer to the truth - that we had become his enemy! What we have forgotten, as a culture, is the novelty of God’s befriending humanity. To understand the awesome reality of the Good News, one has to start at the right place.

The friendly, non-judgmental, warm and fuzzy parody of God that has become the norm in many circles has been juxtaposed to the “mean, old, distant, cold ‘Old Testament God’” that unenlightened people used to believe in, in the ‘bad old days’. But God is neither. In theological terms the ‘distant’ or ‘other’ is what is termed the Transcendent understanding of God and the ‘close’ or ‘like-me’ expression is termed the Immanent. Error lies in emphasizing one to the exclusion of the other. The reality is that God is that which is above and beyond our grasp. But he has allowed Himself to become close to our senses. God is above His creation by Nature. He is the Creator and therefore distinct and separate from His creation. But God comes close to His creatures by choice. He makes Himself known directly. Focusing solely on God’s transcendence and forgetting that He has chosen to make Himself close and knowable removes God from relationship; He is held to be so distant that he becomes the great unknown, who quickly becomes the great forgotten or irrelevant. On the other hand, the risk of not acknowledging the transcendence of God is that we become pantheists, forcing our understanding of God into only familiar and comfortable categories - leading us to a man-made idol and at best a parody of the True God.

Now, to some extent throughout the history of salvation and the history of the Church, there is a healthy back-and-forth with these concepts. One movement emphasizes God’s majesty, the next emphasizes His closeness to humanity. But the major error of our days is that instead of going back and forth we have gradually shifted to God made in the image of Man and have pushed aside the acknowledgement of God as the Almighty Other. The great arc of religious struggles of the past century is that of the ‘immanentizing’ of religion - taking away all expressions of verticality, grandeur and formality, with worship appearing more ‘folksy’, ‘down-to-earth’ and dare we say ‘hokey’. We have gradually eroded a proper ‘fear of God’ and replaced it with a concept of ‘God as my personal teddy bear’. We have exalted his closeness to the exclusion of His majesty. And doing so has upset the balance of a right understanding of God and of ourselves made in his image and likeness.

A great literary exposé of this comes to us by way of C.S. Lewis in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. Here Lewis portrays God as a lion. A dialogue from the story captures humanity’s misunderstanding of the nature of God through Susan Pevensy and the Gospel’s re-orientation through Mr. Beaver:

“Aslan is a lion [Mr. Beaver said] - THE Lion, the great Lion." "Ooh" said Susan. "I'd thought he was a man. Is he quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion"...."Safe?" said Mr. Beaver ..."Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you.”

‘Buddy Jesus’ is the ‘safe God’ of our earthly imaginations. But the reality of God is something far less tame, but also something far better. The key to recovering a proper understanding of God is to find the balance between the Immanent and the Transcendent. And the key to sustaining this balance is in establishing the primacy of the Transcendent. The transcendent nature of God, His otherness, must be the primary emphasis. It must be, if we



are not to be pantheists worshipping rocks and trees. Only by acknowledging God as ‘other’ can we stand in awe of the fact that God has made Himself known to us. This right order is exemplified in today’s readings. God’s majesty and the rightful deference given by the main protagonists model for us a proper reaction of the human being before the majesty of God.

Notice Isaiah’s reaction to being in God’s midst:

*“I saw the Lord seated on a high and lofty throne,
with the train of his garment filling the temple.*

Seraphim were stationed above.

They cried one to the other,

“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts!

All the earth is filled with his glory!”

*At the sound of that cry, the frame of the door shook
and the house was filled with smoke.*

Then I said, “Woe is me, I am doomed!

For I am a man of unclean lips,

living among a people of unclean lips;

yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!”

Without an intervention, Isaiah is doomed! God had to reach down from heaven to cleanse him.:

*“Then one of the seraphim flew to me,
holding an ember that he had taken with tongs from the altar.*

He touched my mouth with it, and said,

*“See, now that this has touched your lips,
your wickedness is removed, your sin purged.”*

This is also alluded to in the 2nd reading. Paul is an apostle ‘Untimely born,’ referring to that fateful day when he was cast down and blinded by the vision of the glorified Christ who said, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?”

This is echoed also in the Gospel.:

When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at the knees of Jesus and said,

“Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.”

*For astonishment at the catch of fish they had made seized him
and all those with him,...*

When Peter realized who Jesus was, that is, the Son of God, the Messiah, he declared his sinfulness, his unworthiness. Then, with a word, ‘Do not be afraid’, the Word Incarnate brought him near and associated Peter and the other apostles with Himself, calling them friends.

This is the pattern the sacred Scriptures teach us. *“Fear of the Lord is the first stage of wisdom.”* People often times make fun of the “Old Testament God.” They will say He was “mean.” Or they will say He is “scary.” In fact, in the Old Testament, God reveals His true majesty, His glory, His might, and His power. He is a lion! If we



were to really know God, we would die of shock! But it also highlights for us the great condescension and humility that God undertakes in the Incarnation of his only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, and the great awe that should be our disposition when we are called to stand before Him. In Jesus Christ, God hides His greatness behind human flesh so that we are not afraid. He takes us off guard, so much so that people will even dismiss him! This is the good news, “*that whoever believes in him, he gave them the power to become children of God.*” See the Gospel of John, Chapter One.

In the holy liturgy we continue this divine pedagogy. The Divine Liturgy rights the wrong of the perverse ordering of our sinful nature. We are taught to sing with the angelic chorus, “Glory to God in the highest,” we join in the seraphic hymn- “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord, God of hosts!” Then, the Lord woos us through the tender words of Scriptures, gradually revealing Himself to us. Then, He comes to us hidden under the common elements of bread and wine. And the Church takes up John the Baptist’s cry, “Behold the Lamb of God, Behold Him who takes away the sins of the world.”

We are taught by Mother Church to individually imitate Isaiah, Paul and Peter utilizing the words of the humble, but obedient centurion, “Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed!”

We are healed of our unworthiness by the saving sacraments that he gives to us through the Church. Through the saving Sacrament of Baptism, our uncleanness is washed away. Through the saving Sacrament of Confirmation God’s hand is laid upon our heads and we are anointed from on high and the tongue of fire of the Holy Spirit comes to rest on our minds and our hearts. And then in the most intimate of the sacraments of initiation, the coal that purified Isaiah’s lips purifies our lips now through the Sacred Body and Precious Blood. “*Unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood you will not have life within you!*”

Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist: this is our purification. Without this work of grace, we would not be worthy; we would not be holy. Without these saving sacraments, we risk the outer darkness, where there is wailing and grinding of teeth. And so it is for us now, who know these great mysteries of redemption, to respond with great thanksgiving. We thank you Lord. We praise you Lord. Now, Lord, that we have been redeemed, let your will reign in our hearts. Let us now live conformed to your way of love. We see that you are God, and that you love us! The Almighty has called us His beloved! We now open this gift of love and exercise it in good works. This explains the conclusion of Mass, *Ite Missa Est*. Literally translated it is “Go forth, she has been sent”. Who is she? The Bride of Christ, the Church, has been sent. You have been sent.

Know that you have been loved, not by a teddy bear but by a lion! You are not healed by feelings but by flesh and blood crucified by love. So, now, go out to all the world and have solidarity with the poor because we once were poor. Have solidarity with the outcast, because we once dwelt in the outer darkness. Have solidarity now with the sick and suffering, because we faced the reality of hell and our own sickness of sin. We ourselves had been strangers and sojourners in a foreign land, and so we find our solidarity with those living in a foreign land.

This Divine love is what inspires our charity.