

Who is it that we meet when we encounter someone? Who is it that they meet when they encounter us? Whoever it is, especially if it happens to be God that we're encountering, Scripture suggests that something crucial can happen in our encounters that alters the trajectory of our lives and the trajectories of other lives as well. Significantly, it's not just the encounter itself, but the way in which we experience it that matters.

In our first reading we learn what it was like for Samuel to encounter the invisible God. The gospel then tells us about what was like for Andrew and his brothers to meet Jesus, God made visible. In the first case, Eli helps Samuel make sense of his encounter with God. In the second, John the Baptist helps Andrew understand exactly who Jesus is.

It would appear then, that although God is perfectly capable of encountering us one-on-one, visibly or otherwise, God frequently initiates God's revelation and the meaning of the encounter through the agency of other people who have already encountered God. It's as if God is emphasizing that our faith is much more than a private affair. Let me tell you a story that might shed some light on why it's that way.

Over the holidays a couple of us spiritually inclined sorts were Zooming over some Christmas cheer, and the topic turned to how we'd met our wives. All of us remarked that other people had been involved at one point or another. When it was his turn, one of my friends, who was born in India, told us he had a story about his dad and him that he wanted to share.

"When I was a teenager," he began, "my dad asked me if I wanted him to arrange a marriage for me. I remember being shocked by the question. How could anyone marry a person he'd never met? Don't you have to love someone first? We'd lived in America for a while by then, and I knew that was simply not how things were done here, at least not anymore."

“I remembered hearing him talk about how things were done back in India though, and I didn’t want to hurt his feelings, so I smiled and asked respectfully ‘Why would you want to do that, Pop?’”

“He told me ‘Some people back in the village I came from arrange marriages to improve their social or economic situations, but it’s not that way with mom and me and you. It may just be that we and the rest of the family know you better than you think you know yourself, Arun. We’ve known you since before you had words to express yourself. We know from experience the entirety of what’s in you, the good, the bad and the ugly and how it got that way. We love you anyway and wish only the best for you. So would the family of anyone we might select for you. You see, it’s all about goodness and love.’”

Arun stopped for a moment in his story and said “You know, guys, I know my parents aren’t God, but at that moment I felt a deep sense that God was present in them. There was no sense of self-interest; only the purest form of love for me.”

The rest of us got pretty quiet. We knew what he was talking about, or at least wished we did.

Then he continued. “I asked my dad if his marriage had been arranged and he told me it had been. On impulse I asked, ‘Did you love Mom before you were married, Pop, sight unseen?’ ‘No,’ he replied honestly. ‘We were told to trust that would happen as we grew together.’”

“When we first encountered each other it was awkward, just because we didn’t really know each other yet. It turned out, however, that our families actually did know us better than we knew ourselves. As I opened up more and more to Mom and she opened up to me, our love grew far beyond anything I could have imagined.”

Arun's story about his dad's marriage is similar to what happened in the cases of Samuel and Andrew. At the outset, neither Samuel nor Andrew really knew who they were encountering or to what they were being called. A greater wisdom and kind, trustworthy love was guiding them both though, directly and through the agency of other people, to respond "Here I am Lord, your servant is listening" to a call that eventually took them into the heart of mystery and of love.

More deeply now, let's consider the gift of the Eucharist and what these incidents from Scripture might be teaching us about it. In the Eucharist, is it not Jesus Christ we encounter, offering himself to us in love, both directly and through others?

Maybe Samuel's story and Andrew's aren't all that different from yours and mine. Perhaps Scripture is telling us that God, who has known all of us from before the get-go and knows us today better than we will ever know ourselves, is arranging a relationship for us that's far more wonderful and intimate even than marriage, regardless of whether we're unfamiliar with the voice that is beckoning to us or happen to need some help to discern the underlying reality. Our trusting companionship is being sought to spread the invitation far and wide for a journey of love and discovery that goes both deep within and far beyond anything we could ever arrange on our own.

So, who is it that we meet when we encounter someone else? Who is it that they meet when they encounter us? If our answer to God's invitation has been "Here I am, Lord, your servant is listening," then the correct answer is that it's God's Eucharistic presence acting within us that they meet. Openness to God leads to it becoming more and more the case that when people encounter you and me, they encounter God's visible and invisible love; when they hear us, they hear the whispers of God's love echoing among the syllables, and when they feel our kind and gentle touch, they feel enveloped by the embrace of God's love.