

Reflections on Sunday's Readings: June 30, 2019



Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

I Kings 19: 16b, 19-21

Galatians 5: 1, 13-18

Luke 9: 51-62

A New Worldview

Introduction

The first public word we hear from Jesus in the Gospels as he begins his ministry is “*metanoete*.” This is a Greek imperative verb. St. Jerome, when he gathered up the Hebrew Scriptures and the Greek Scriptures to translate them into Latin for Western Europe, translated this first public word of Jesus with the word “*paenitentia*.” *Paenitentia* literally means “repent” or “do penance;” thus, to do penance for our sins. But this influenced our understanding of Jesus’ call to be more moralistic and focused on our individual conversion.

In its original Greek the word “*metanoete*” is much more expansive. It means “change your mindset.” Change your worldview and your way of processing life, rather than a specific change of behavior. And Jesus comes to us living out of this “new worldview” of God’s unconditional love that he knows deeply within himself because he comes to us from the heart of the Trinity. We might take a moment and wonder what our lives would be like if we really believed and lived out of the understanding of ourselves as being beloved sons and daughters of God. How would we relate to one another if we really saw one another as sisters and brothers sharing this fertile earth that has been given to us by our loving God?

Our Woundedness

We know through our own lives that often we are wounded by others’ sins or struggles, and we wound others through our brokenness also. These wounds make it difficult at times to believe and live out of this vision of God’s love and mercy for us.

What is it, I wonder at times, that makes me hold on to my sins (or the sins against me) rather than to let go and trust in God's providence and unconditional love? Maybe because my sins are right in front of me I find it hard to let go and trust in God's gracious love. We will need God's grace all along the way in our lives to open up to this expansive and encouraging vision of God loving us always.

Fr. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, SJ

I was thinking of this call to "change our mindset and vision" this week as I drove to and from our Franciscan Alumni Reunion in Detroit, Michigan. This is a long trip, and so I took along some CD's to listen to as I traveled. I listened especially to a number of talks about Fr. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. Teilhard was a Jesuit priest born at the end of the 1800's, and he died in 1955. He was a brilliant man who was a scientist and a priest. He studied anthropology and paleontology and the beginnings of life. Teilhard examined fossils, bones, and skeletons to see the development of life and especially of human life here on earth. He also was a deeply religious Catholic-Christian especially because of the influence of his mother's faith and religious practice.

Throughout his life Teilhard tried to reconcile his insights and work as a scientist and his religious beliefs and Catholic faith. These talks that I listened to were about his early writings when he was a "stretcher-bearer" in WWI. He was losing friends around him, and yet God was inspiring his reflections on what he was seeing through his research into the development of life on earth along with what he believed as a Catholic priest. Teilhard really laid the foundation for us in the Catholic Church to see more clearly God at work in the evolution of life and especially of human life.

Teilhard saw the pattern of ever greater "consciousness" coming to the fore as the human family especially grew in awareness of itself here on earth. He saw the growing complexity of life forms, and of human awareness especially, over time. This Teilhard saw as the development of "spirit" in evolution. He kept reflecting on the letters of St. Paul and the writings of St. John in the Bible in light of his research, and he saw more and more the place of "Christ" as both the pre-existent Word and now as the "Universal Christ" drawing all of life into unity.

Human Development

I offer these thoughts because just as we develop through stages of greater understanding and consciousness as individual persons, so we are doing as a global human family. God's love always leaves us free to respond in a positive way or a negative way. This is the kind of God we have. And so we can choose to live in a gracious and constructive way, or we may choose to live in a more self-centered way that can be destructive to ourselves and to others.

"Flesh and Spirit"

These thoughts are truly at the core of the Scriptures we heard today. In the second reading Paul is calling us to let go of the "flesh" in our lives and to draw near to the "spirit" in our lives. I believe most of us in the West when we hear "flesh," we think of sex, but this isn't what Paul

is talking about here. He sees the “flesh” to be avoided as our selfishness, our self-centered tendencies that keep us from being generous with our lives. For Paul the “spirit” is the generous part of us that reaches out to others, wants to help serve others, and wants to help them come to their own completeness and wholeness.

These deeper insights into Paul’s reflections are why we promote today a more holistic and appreciative embrace of who we are as “embodied spirits” or “inspired bodies.” We carry within us God’s DNA of goodness, beauty, and truth; and so we know more and more the goodness of who we are as embodied persons.

A very fine Catholic professor, Fr. James J. Bacik, a Rahnerian scholar, offers in a reflection on this reading in Galatians some contemporary ways of looking at “flesh” and “spirit.” This might help us see more fully what Paul means with regards to flesh and spirit.

Several “**selfish or self-centered tendencies**” he offers are: “addictions to perceived pleasures, such as sex, drugs, shopping, gambling, and alcohol; neurotic guilt; excessive anxiety about our personal salvation; an exorbitant need for affirmation and praise; resentments, anger, and rages; the need to be in control and dominate others or situations; irrational fears; compulsive work habits; and anything of preliminary importance that becomes an absolute concern.”

Regarding our being “**free in the Spirit**” and free to do good, Bacik offers: we see the “liberating power of Christ in individuals who have overcome constraints and moved toward greater spiritual maturity: those who have overcome addictions and are helping others to follow a similar path; those who have overcome workaholic tendencies and are more loving as spouses, as family members, partners, community members, or as members of the global human family; those who have overcome self-centered tendencies and devote themselves to helping those in need; those who have overcome fears of damnation and are more trusting of God’s mercy; and those who have overcome a narrow private piety and are engaged in the cause of justice and peace.” All of these show forth the “liberating grace of Christ.”

Discipleship and Obedience

All of this comes together in the Gospel reading today where we hear Jesus talking about discipleship. These are some hard statements to hear: ‘let the dead bury their own dead’ or ‘no one who puts their hand on the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.’

Part of what is happening here is Jesus is speaking within his own culture that spoke in the form of “hyperbole,” that is extremes to make a point. Jesus is saying ‘this is important to realize about discipleship.’ It will be difficult at times. It will call for putting at times the sacred duties to the family of God before your sacred duties to your natural families. Commitment to the “kingdom/kin-dom of God” becomes a priority in your life, if you say yes. It doesn’t mean that we can’t visit our families or go to their funerals, but it does mean to be aware of the “costs and commitment” of saying yes to helping God’s ways come upon the earth.

Most of all what I hear in this Gospel after sitting with it awhile is that just as we say 'contemplation is the long, loving look at reality,' so "obedience" is the long, loving "listening" to the Word of God and the will of God in our lives. This listening and hearing of God's voice and God's ways calls for a **steadfastness** in our relationship with God to know of God's dreams and hopes for all of us together and for all of creation.

We need God's grace each day for our transformations and for the transformation of our world. God does give us **the grace we need with every new day.**

Resources:

Fr. Richard Rohr, OFM, The Universal Christ, New York: Convergent Books, 2019, pp. 92-93, regarding "metanoete" and "paenitentia."

Fr. James F. Salmon, SJ, PhD, Teilhard de Chardin: Creating a Universal Mysticism, 9 lectures on 4 CD's, Now You Know Media, Inc., 2012.

Fr. James J. Bacik, PhD, On-line reflections on "Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, C Cycle," June 30, 2019. [jamesjbacik@gmail.com]

Fr. Henry B. Beck, OFM / St. Francis Retreat House, Easton, PA.