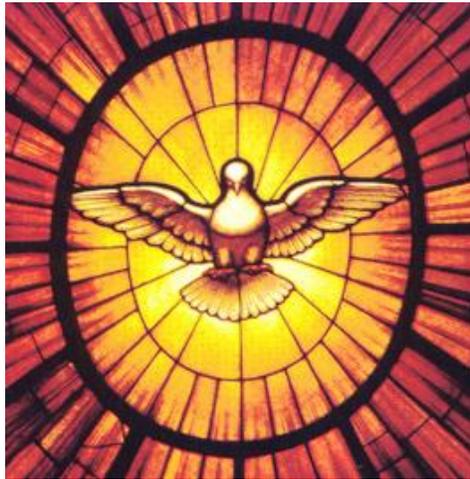


Reflections on Sunday's Readings: August 18, 2019



Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Jeremiah 38: 4-6, 8-10

Hebrews 12: 1-4

Luke 12: 49-53

Fully Human and Fully Divine

Introduction

This weekend on our PBS station they have been showing the concert celebrating the music and play called "Les Miserables." As many of you may know this is a beautiful play about the French Revolution. The music and the characters are amazing and moving.

The story really revolves around two main characters, Jean Valjean, a man who stole bread to feed his nephew, and Javert, the police inspector who arrested Jean Valjean for his crime. Jean is in prison for a long time, but he finally breaks out of jail ahead of his time of parole. Javert vows to bring him back to complete his sentence.

As the story unfolds we see Jean growing through various experiences to become a man of compassion. Javert is a very strict "law and order" police inspector who is not able to welcome or give mercy, even as Jean saves his life at one point in the story. A high point in the story is a song-prayer that Jean sings to God for a young man (Marius) that he has met on the barricades who has fallen in love with his adopted daughter, Cosette. At first, Jean tries to protect Cosette from this young man; but Jean finally sees that their being together would be best for both of them. He knows his life might be coming to an end, and Jean wants this young couple to have a full life together. And so Jean sings to God this beautiful prayer for Marius: **"Bring him home, bring him peace, bring him life, bring him joy, bring him home."**

A way into the Gospel message

I believe this story and this prayer can offer us a way into the meaning of our Gospel today. The **“fire”** that burns in Jesus’ heart is the fiery passionate and compassionate love of the Trinity. Jesus knows this generous, self-giving love that flows in and through the heart of the Trinity: through the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; and he wants this to be known and received by us in the human family. Jesus wants this so much that he joins us in the flesh. He speaks of this compassionate love as the **“kingdom of God,”** or today we might say the **“kin-dom of God.”**

Jesus so wants us to know this love of the Trinity that he is willing to go through his suffering and death to absorb our violence and our resistance to God’s love. And then his Resurrection is the true breakthrough that tells us that **“love”** is the strongest reality in life! The love of the Trinity is our origin and our destiny. Hopefully, Jesus’ love and self-sacrifice for us breaks through our fears, our hard-heartedness and our resistance.

Another way in ... how we are made

Another way into this Gospel reading with its challenge of “transformation” is to consider how we are made as human persons. In the 1960’s a scholar, Dr. Paul MacLean, offered insights into the evolution of our human brains. This theory has been updated over time, but basically the insight is that our human brains have evolved in three stages. These parts of our brain interact with one another, but they still have certain capabilities on their own from this evolutionary development.

The oldest part of our brain is what we share with reptiles, and it is sometimes called our **“reptilian” brain**. This part controls the body’s basic functions like heart rate, breathing, body temperature, and balance. It also is where our “default” activities are, like our “flight and fight” responses to conflict or danger, and where our reproductive responses are located. The brain functions in this part of our brain are reliable, but they also can be rigid and compulsive.

The second part of our human brain is the **“early mammal” brain**, also called the **“limbic”** brain. This part of our brain records the memories of behaviors that produced agreeable or disagreeable experiences. It holds what we find familiar or unfamiliar and what we judge as valuable. This part of our brain has a strong influence on our behaviors, but it can influence us unconsciously.

The third part of our brain as humans is the **“later mammal” brain** called the **“neocortex.”** This is the part of our brain that has developed into two large “hemispheres” that play such a dominant role in our lives. This is where our capacities for language, abstract thought, imagination, and consciousness reside. This part of our brain is more flexible and has almost infinite learning abilities. This part of our brain enables culture and the arts to develop. We might associate this part of our brain with our “higher angels” as some talk about.

Jesus’ Call to Us

Jesus’ full humanity and divinity calls us to stretch and use all we are as human persons for one another, for the common good, and for our relationship with God. Some writers have offered

that most persons use only about 10% of their brain power. There is so much more to use and develop. Jesus calls us into our full humanity and our full divinity, and he also calls us to go beyond “built-in” patterns or habits. Jesus wants us to continually stretch into new ways of understanding, living and loving.

But this **takes “practice.”** We are aware more and more today that we humans must practice the virtues and character strengths we hope to grow strong in. We need to go beyond hearing about these virtues or character strengths, or thinking about them, and put them into action. This really is how they become part of us. So, we need to practice compassion and self-sacrificial love. We must practice forgiveness and negotiation in conflictual situations. We must practice developing new spiritual and human virtues and strengths, and at times we must break free from familial and societal patterns or prejudices we learned when we were young for a richer, more inclusive and more participatory life. We are called to learn that “no” is a full sentence and to develop healthy boundaries for our lives. We are being called also to develop more “contemplative practices” in our spiritual lives so that we will grow into greater maturity and freedom as followers of Christ. All of this is what Christ calls us to: our full humanity and our full divinity. But it takes work, and so we at times resist Christ’s call to us.

But we can see this call from Christ as **good news**. We can reflect on our lives and see where we can grow. We can trust that Jesus is giving us the inspiration and grace to stretch in new ways. So ... we will need to look at our patterns, our lifestyles, our decisions, our actions or inaction. Are we living out of our “reptilian” brain? Or are we living out of our more flexible and creative brain? Are we focused on ourselves only? Or are we using our gifts for the greater good of the community around us? It also speaks to our looking at the leaders we may choose to guide our country. Are they speaking to the fears we have in our more ‘protective self,’ or are they calling us to greater creativity and greater trust in ourselves and others? This is the kind of reflection that our Gospel today can stir within us.

Conclusion

In the second reading today we hear that there is a **“cloud of witnesses”** that surrounds us. We know we are not alone in our lives and especially not alone in this Eucharist. All of our loved ones who have gone before us are with us, and they are encouraging us to grow and develop all the various parts of ourselves. They did what was theirs to do in their lives, and now they are supporting us in our journeys and in our stretching into fuller lives. One very interesting part of looking at our brains is to discover that we can actually develop **“new pathways” or synapses** in our brains when we practice new ways of living. Jesus, and the “cloud of witnesses” of family members, friends, and the holy men and women believers before us, are encouraging us on; and Jesus walks by our side to lead us forward.

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