

Reflections on Sunday's Readings: November 10, 2019

Thirty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time [C]

2 Maccabees 7: 1-2; 9-14

2 Thessalonians 2: 16-3:5

Luke 20: 27-38



Infinite Life in the Presence of God

Introduction

The journey of the Hebrew community, the Jewish journey, into ever deeper faith in God led them to consider more and more the meaning of life, of suffering, and of their belonging to a God of life and justice. They journeyed through life trusting this Beloved One and learning that this One is trustworthy, full of justice that restores, and One who has the final word over evil and woundedness.

This led them to the time we often call the “intertestamental time period.” This is the time period of the 200 years before Christ and the 100 years following Christ. In this time period the Jewish community became more conscious that this Beloved God meant for them to not only have life while on this earth but to also experience and enjoy infinite life, a life beyond this life. This awareness begins to break through more consciously. This was there in the beginning of their journey with God, but now it was coming to the fore.

A Mother and Her Seven Sons

A very significant story in this developing consciousness of a further life is the story we heard today in the first reading. The Jewish community is being forced to adopt the Greek culture from Greek invaders. The Greek invaders want the Jewish community to give up their religious practices, and they take over the Temple and use it for their purposes. The mother and her seven sons resist this forced enculturation and the loss of their religious identity. They trust in the God they believe in to hold them with care.

I wanted to share with you the mother's words to her sons just before the torture and killing of her sons begins: "I do not know how you came to be in my womb; it was not I who gave you breath and life. Therefore ... the Creator of the universe will give you back both breath and life since you now disregard yourselves for the sake of the Torah, God's law."

The story more and more reflects the Jewish insight that the God we believe in ... who is loving and just ... will restore us to life. The last word over evil belongs to God!

Different Parties or Denominations in the Jewish Faith

In the time of Jesus there were different "parties" or "denominations" within the Jewish community. These different parties had varying beliefs and practices. The Pharisees were the common teachers of the people. They studied the Torah, the Law, together in study houses; and they shared these teachings with the people in the local synagogues. The Sadducees were members of the high priestly class. They were more the ruling class of people, the elites of Jewish society and religion. They were connected to the Temple and the worship there.

These two groups look at this question of life after this life differently. The Pharisees are open to life after death. For the Sadducees, you live on through your descendants and their memories of you. They do not foresee an afterlife as such.

In light of Luke's Gospel, Jesus has now arrived at Jerusalem. He has made his joyful entrance into Jerusalem. He has cleared out the sellers and money changers from the Temple area, and he has begun to teach there day by day. So the Pharisees come and test him with their questions, and the Sadducees have their questions and tests for him also during this time. Both groups test him, but the Sadducees in this Gospel passage come to mock this idea of a life after death. Their story about the seven brothers and this one wife is really offered to make fun of this idea or belief in a life beyond this life.

What Heaven is Like

Jesus does not get entangled in their machinations. He uses their story as a way to speak about the next life and its meaning for us. Jesus explains that there is no need in heaven for marriage to raise the next generation of children because in heaven all live forever. In heaven God will be all in all. All will experience a life of communion and joy like the angels. The Kingdom of God will be a place of fulfillment in God's love. This is a great hope for us: we will share in the infinite life of the One who created us and loves us.

Heaven Begins Now

I often feel that the community preaches to me all during the week, and then I have the privilege and responsibility to share this wisdom and these insights with all of you on Sunday. This week a good number of experiences have led me to think about **heaven beginning now, that Risen Life begins now, that Eternal life begins now.**

I remembered a line from St. Catherine of Siena where she says: **“All the way to heaven is heaven because Jesus is the way.”** At first I thought this was just a playful saying; but the more I have reflected on it, I see that it is really very profound. All the way to heaven Jesus is walking right beside us, so yes, all the way to heaven is heaven with Jesus’ companionship every moment of our lives.

One of the first experiences this past week where I was reminded of heaven was in a conversation with Fr. Bernie who was here with the high school group on retreat. I had been thinking of a few experiences here at the retreat house that I really wanted to bounce off of a fellow priest. Bernie is a very real and human priest, and so I asked him if he would have some time while he was here for a conversation. We talked a good while about the challenges and vulnerabilities of being a priest and especially about our preaching the Gospel with our people. I felt new insights and energy around my being a priest and my calling as a priest. This was a moment of “eternal life” breaking through into my life.

Another experience this week was hearing Jeanne speak to the retreatants here this weekend about “first cup.” Jeanne invited us to share our first cup of coffee, Mountain Dew, Diet Coke, orange juice, whatever we begin the day with ... talking with God. Let the “first cup” of the day be with God, telling God what is going on in our lives. I’ve tried this the past two days, and it is very helpful. She offered that “God aches to hear what is going on in our lives.” God has special names for us and wants to hear about our lives, our hopes, our doubts, our fears, and our joys. This too spoke to me about eternal life beginning right here, right now, in being present to God and letting God be present to us.

Another place where I felt God talking to me about eternal life was in listening to stories about what can happen especially between a husband and a wife. The joys and deep satisfaction of a couples’ mutual love-making and sharing of life. But also how things can change at times in terms of an accident to one of the spouses, or an illness, or the loss of a spouse after many years of marriage. Or sometimes divorce happens when a partner is not expecting this. These changes can call for an adjustment in how we love and grow.

I thought of my own life and my early priesthood years. I was talking with another priest then, my spiritual director, and I shared with him what I was experiencing. I was very grateful for being invited into intimate conversations and encounters with others. I also shared how at times I felt the feelings of attraction to these persons, to their beauty, to their goodness, and to the truthfulness of their lives. I asked him how to deal with these feelings that don’t go away after you make vows.

And he shared with me that if I was being called to be a friar and a priest, I would be given the gift of restraint. I would be given the gift to care deeply for others but also to leave room for God to be primary in their lives. I would be given the gift to leave space for God to care for them and for others to care for them, and I would find my way as “brother” and friend to them.

This, I believe, happens in many ways in all of our lives. For example, this kind of loving is at work when you welcome and love dearly a new daughter-in-law or a new son-in-law, when you love a neighbor with graciousness, when you teach and treat others with respect, and when you reach out to an elderly person in the neighborhood.

My priest friend offered that to love with restraint in these moments, to respect the other person in this way, is as much an expression of unconditional love as the moments of full affection between a husband and wife.

All these various experiences of communion, and many more, are moments of “eternal life.” They are **moments of deep presence that express eternal life, life that lasts forever.**

Conclusion

Our novice director, Fr. Joe Rayes, OFM, was a very dear man. He was very gracious and loving. His ethnic background was Lebanese, and he loved life. Joe would often say to us: ‘Brothers, you need to dream about the Kingdom of God in technicolor!’ Today we might say ‘in HD, or HD 2.’

But what he wanted us to know and open ourselves up to was **experiencing God’s love and God’s dreams for us in vivid color, in vivid life.** He offered that this needs to be a big part of our lives as we go about living our lives as friars and interacting with others ... to nurture us and to nurture others. We need to be able to see and taste the goodness of God and what God has in store for us ... now and to come.

My Mom died young, at the age of 53 years. My Dad lived on for another 40 or so years. He lived a good life. Dad became a deacon and became the “Grandpa” of our home parish. He passed at the age of 95 years. Moments after Dad passed, I thought: ‘he is now back in Mom’s arms.’ Then a few moments later, I thought: ‘they are dancing together once again.’

This is what we celebrate at every Eucharist: Love is stronger than death. Love lasts forever. Love is eternal.

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