

Safe at Home -- Proper 24C – Pent+22C

This is another one of those times Jesus is reported by Luke to have used an obtuse image to describe our suggested path to rightness with the nature of God; and this one is a little disconcerting. Is God like the arrogant judge, who doesn't care about the issue at hand but, wanting a little peace and quiet, will answer our prayers just to shut us up? Like the fellow back in Chapter 11 who, when his neighbor knocks on his door at midnight wanting bread for unexpected guests answers, "Go away! Quit bothering me! You see my door is shut and tell you my children are with me in bed. I'm not about to get up just to give you something." But, says Jesus, "Even though he will not get up out of friendship, because of the man's persistence, will get up and give him whatever he needs. And so it is with God: ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you." The implication is that God may not like hearing you and helping you, but if you're persistent, what difference does it make?

Hold the phone. I thought God loved us. I thought God *was* love. How can that truth jibe with the jaded, self-centered, eye rolling, annoyed *whateverist* of a judge or neighbor in these parables? We have to keep in mind that, however heavy-handedly, Luke is illustrating, not God's character, but our appropriate response to the realities and verities of existence: Persist in faith; persist in prayer, regardless of the immediate circumstances, or chances or outcome of our pleas.

This is sound, albeit hardly heartwarming advice. But surely more explaining would have been nice. Luke's comparison of God with this callous, arrogant fellow is accurate only in the sense of disinterestedness. The analogy is a blunt and single-minded one. It comes at a time when Jesus is nearing the time of his death; he has less and less time for our haughtiness, our hypersensitivity, our stubbornness. Before Chapter 18 is through we will hear about the humble tax collector who is closer to God than the pious holy man

(a Pharisee), we will hear Jesus tell the people to come to him as a child or don't bother coming at all; he will tell the rich man to give away everything he owns because the rich cannot enter God's kingdom, and he will tell them of his own approaching humiliation, execution and resurrection. "But," Luke writes, "They understood nothing about all these things; in fact, what he said was hidden from them, and (not only that) they did not grasp what was said." Perhaps Luke went on to work in the Department of Redundancy Department.

But wait, there's more: Jesus' last act in Chapter 18 comes as they get to Jericho, where the culture of the Israelites first took root. This journey itself symbolizes getting back to the fundamental nature of the Israelites' covenant with God, as described by Jeremiah. Jesus spontaneously heals a blind man, known as Bartimaeus in Luke's source, The Gospel according to Mark. Why did both Matthew and Luke eliminate the man's name – one of the few healed persons who is even given a name? Could it be because its symbolism acknowledges the cultural complexity from which the Christian movement emerged, a complexity we continue to ignore at our peril? Where Mark is happy to do this, relying on the mystic power of Jesus' story to establish its unique sacredness, both Matthew and Luke exercise their artistic – and political – license to eliminate any hint of our secular origins.

Bar-timaeus or 'Son of Timaeus' is a strange name, 'Bar' being the Aramaic and Hebrew prefix meaning 'Son of,' but 'Timaeus' being anything but Semitic. Timaeus is a character in Plato's *Dialogues*, who describes a theology and worldview much like that of the Hebrews and Jesus. Tim draws a distinction between the physical world and the eternal world: the physical world changes and perishes; it is the object of opinion and instinctive sensation; we think and talk about it the way we hope and wish it were. The eternal world, by contrast never changes: therefore it can be apprehended by understanding. It can be described according to the realities and verities of existence. This is sounding awfully

familiar. Jesus facilitates opening the eyes of the blind, but it is their faith that does the healing. Mark acknowledges the secular – Greek -- antecedents of our knowledge of God.

For Timaeus, any talk about the two worlds is conditioned by the nature of their objects. Thus, a description of what is changeless and fixed will be changeless and fixed, while a description of what changes and is merely supposed will also change and be accordingly speculative. "As being is to becoming, so is truth to belief," says Plato -- via Timaeus. Therefore, in a description of the physical world, "Don't look for anything more than likely stories." But descriptions of the eternal world – as we rehearse in the Holy Eucharist, for example – truth is possible. We acknowledge this ourselves in the Breaking of the Bread by saying "Be what you see," an invitation to move from the physical world to the eternal world, followed by "Become who you are," a summons to continuous spiritual movement in the direction of our hearts' home in the Body of Christ. Jeremiah has described this spiritual 'home' as the substance of God's covenant with Israel: "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the Lord," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord"

By Chapter 19, Jesus is weeping over Jerusalem. Riding into the city in ironic triumph on the back of a donkey, to cleanse the temple and to die.

Our homeward movement is propelled by persistence in prayer, by continual attempts to make ourselves useful to others, by contemplating and meditating on the Gospels, the Law and the Prophets, and by regularly 'cleaning house' to let the grace of God come in and lead us back where we belong. Listen to the psalmist again: "I have not turned from your decrees. The ways you yourself have taught me. Your promises are sweeter in my mouth than the taste of clearest honey. From your precepts I gain understanding,

and so I have come to hate every false way. Your word is a lamp for my footsteps and a light for my darkest path.”

Timaeus suggests that since nothing "becomes or changes" without cause, the cause of the universe must be a god, a figure he refers to as the father and maker of the universe. And since the universe is fair, the god must have looked to the eternal model to make it, and not to the perishable one. Using the eternal and perfect as a template, he set about creating our world, which existed, but in a state of disorder. Timaeus continues with an explanation of the creation of the universe, which he ascribes to the handiwork of a divine craftsman. The god, being wholly good, wanted there to be as much good as was possible in the world. HmMMM.

So if there's something broken, it's us, not God. It's not our religion itself, but the sometime practices of its worldly adherents, the denominations, the cultures, the desires and ignominies of people that send us too often awry to self defeat. One monk has written: What remains unchanging and good is the mystical stuff, the Church's rituals, her ancient traditions, her rich interpretations of the Bible, the bold promise of communion with God. The mystery of God attracts people to the faith, though it may only be glimpsed – as through a glass darkly – in our rites and prayers.

Commissioner Bart Giamatti once said of baseball, "It breaks your heart; it is designed to break your heart." The same could be said of this worldly life. It is by faith we know that our hearts will ultimately be mended. It is through the mysteries of God's Church that we feel whole again to participate and persist and walk on in love. When I was a child, I played hockey as a child, I had the heroes of a child, I loved my home team like a child. Being from St Louis, Missouri, they were the St Louis Blues. But I was terrible at baseball. "You're swingin' like a rusty gate," they'd yell at me. Hahaha. When I became a man, (I still wasn't any good at baseball, but) I gave up childish things. Which brings me to today's real

topic, the St. Louis Cardinals. Now I know this is dangerous territory I'm venturing into, especially this close to LA, but really, being a St. Louis Cardinal fan is (so as not to blaspheme) almost like, that is to say tantamount to a biblical experience. Sometimes they are terrible and sad, and sometimes they are laughingly miraculous. One's life as a fan is, like human existence itself, full of highs and lows, satisfaction and disappointment, love and loss.

Of course they're not Gods. Our beloved hero and citizen Stan Musial helped the Redbirds win the whole shebang three times over 22 seasons. Over the rest of his life, he handed out thousands of postcard-sized autograph pictures stashed in his jacket pockets, to kids whose hero he became though they never saw him play on earth. I've got one somewhere.

No, they're not Gods, but they are written on our hearts. They are our team, and we are their people. Every Spring we begin our covenant anew; we forgive their iniquity and remember last year's sins no more, because we know they will go out and persist, whatever the cost (and they cost plenty). They persist; they are rewarded. And so are we, six times out of ten. Sometimes we are plucked up and destroyed, sometimes we build and plant. But always we carry the memory of, and the hope for winning years. It is satisfying; it is the best of this world.

Just as we turn to them for our taste of perfection on this worldly plane, we look to God's grace for the kind of perfection that transcends all time and space. Just as we rush down to the stadium or to the big screen or the radio to see our alter-ego's exercise, we gaze upon the heights of God's Word to seek nourishment for our souls. We seek God, knowing it to be a mystery unknowable in full. Come what might, we root for the home team. Inasmuch as we are able to return our gaze to its search for God among the hills and mountains, come what may our hungry, curious, wistful souls will be satisfied with the sight of God's face, and we will be safe at home.