

Homily for January 23, 2011

As you may have noticed, the last half of our first reading for today begins with a passage from Isaiah used at Christmas mass: “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom a light has shone.” Our Gospel for today quotes this passage and then immediately continues: “From that time on, Jesus began to preach and say, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.’” Immediately after these words we heard Jesus calling men from the work of their daily lives to become, in the words of the Gospel, “fishers of men.”

But then as we look at the second reading, those fish that the Apostles and others had caught sound more like sharks, attacking one another as they say, “‘I belong to Paul,’ or ‘I belong to Apollos,’ or ‘I belong to Cephas.’” Just a few weeks ago one of our daily readings was taken from I John:

Beloved, . . . we love [God] because he first loved us, [John wrote. And if] anyone says, “I love God,” but hates his brother, he is a liar; for whoever does not love a brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. This is the commandment we have from him: Whoever loves God must also love his brother (I John 4:19-21).

When people, even people who profess Christ, rip and tear at one another, how can we say that we belong to Christ?

The times we live in have received many names—the Technological Age, the Age of Secularism, the Space Age, the Computer Age, etc. I wonder, however, if in terms of human relations, our times should be called the Age of Privacy and Depersonalization. We all want our own space—our own bed, our own bathroom, our own car, and so it goes. Immigrants, the poor, and the homeless are “them,” not us. They are categories, not people. A woman has the right to make choices about her own body, a man has the right to express himself, even crudely, and to carry his own gun, and we all tend to live in the privacy of our own minds, often fearful that someone will enter that private space, which is “me.” People who oppose my rights, as I see my rights, are Nazis or socialists or right-wingers. It is not surprising, then, that we tend to have a private faith; it’s just

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me and God. And I keep my faith out of my business or political or social life. I'm reminded of the words of a not very admirable character in the short story "Greenleaf" by the Catholic writer Flannery O'Connor: "God should be kept in church where he belongs just as sex should be kept in the bedroom." If I might sum up what I am trying to say: we live in a time or in a world that has, in many ways, become "darkness" and "gloom" once again. We have forgotten what love is.

We often think of love as a purely private matter, as something just between the two of us. What we do, notice that I said, what we **do** within the privacy of our homes or our apartments or in a motel room is nobody's business. This is love?

Love does not exclude others. I would even say love draws not just parishes and communities, but whole worlds together. Our second daughter, Suzanne, married into a Polish Catholic family from Wisconsin. One of the first people her husband Bob introduced her to was his former girl friend, Maria. When Bob and Suzanne were planning their wedding, Suzanne asked Maria to be a bridesmaid, and now the two of them are not just best friends; they have become family to each other. Bob's mother, a widow and not a wealthy one, invited not only her family and our family to the rehearsal dinner; she invited our other son-in-law's family, and thus brought all of us together, and we continue the friendships that began at that dinner in the basement of her home. My Mississippi Southern Baptist mother was among those present. I will never forget her response: "These are some of the most wonderful Christian people I've ever seen." Love and loving people draw others into love. Love is not private.

That a Mississippi Southern Baptist was impressed by the faith of a Yankee Catholic family, I would say, is a major achievement. I want to tell you how Catholic. My son-in-law Bob's identical twin is a priest. He had four aunts who were nuns and a fifth aunt who never married and was secretary at the basilica in Milwaukee for between forty and fifty years. Even so, it wasn't and isn't what I would call a pious family. They aren't the kind of people we, in Mississippi, used to call "syrupy sweet." They all seem to be just who they are, without pretense or show. By their warmth and graciousness they draw others in.

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In our land today we hear the strident voices, and we all are very conscious of the attempted murder of Representative Gabrielle Giffords. Let us not, like those in our second reading, belong to the Democratic party or the Republican party rather than belong to Christ and his Church. Let us not join ourselves to the prejudice and hatred that says **all** Muslims are terrorists. Let us not join those who say that they defend family values but advocate the deportation of a parent or of an entire family with the result that members of the family may be separated, families that have endured great danger and have worked hard in order to make a better life for their children.

Am I saying that those who love and are loved never feel alone? I'm quite sure that at times everyone feels alone, for none of us lives without difficulty and pain. I'm sure that sometimes all of us feel as if we live in the "land of gloom" and like a voice crying out in the wilderness. But when we sincerely love others and when we are sincere in our religious belief and practice, we are drawing worlds together in ways that no one but God can calculate.