

Easter VII May 16, 2010

One of the advantages to being a preacher is that, from time to time, when something happens that bothers me, I can take whatever that is and use it to bother *you*, too. Today's Gospel, combined with something my philosophy students always seem to do, makes me uncomfortable, and I want to share. I won't solve anything in this sermon; but I do hope it will leave you a little bit uncomfortable, too.

The Gospel reading is still from the night he was betrayed. It comes soon after the words about love we talked about recently. Today we come to the closing words of Jesus' prayer to the Father—the words he says immediately before he walks with his disciples to Gethsemane. So these are, are, quite literally, the last words Jesus speaks before he reaches out to embrace his destiny. They're important.

Jesus is praying about those who believe in him because of the ministry of the disciples—he's praying about us, and about everybody who has come to faith through the ministry of the Church. So, what does Jesus pray about us? What are his closing thoughts about those who will call him Lord in the generations to come? It's fascinating: Jesus doesn't pray that we will be successful, or that we will be happy, or that we will be powerful; he doesn't even pray that we will be right. Instead, he prays that we will be one—that we will be one, as he and the Father are one. Jesus prays that everyone who believes in him through the work of his Church be one.

Now, what this unity, this being one as Jesus and the Father are one, what this is supposed to look like, Jesus doesn't say; and we have to try to figure it out. I suspect that it has to do *at least* with sharing a common life and a common will—

With being joined together in such a way that to be in relationship with one is to be in relationship with all; with being bound together in love; with sharing a common faith and, more than likely, a common Cup. We're a long way from that.

Also like love, our unity is supposed to show. Jesus says that the first reason for this unity is "that the world may believe that you have sent me." That is, again like love, the unity of Christians is intended to shock and challenge the world. It's supposed to be evidence, if not proof, that Jesus was sent by the Father. Jesus is praying that the world out there be able to look at the Christian community and see some things that are so distinctive, so different, and so special that the world will be forced to make a choice—a choice between the way it lives now, and the clearly different way that we live. The bare existence of the Christian Church is intended by Jesus to force people to reevaluate their allegiances and their priorities.

O.K. That's a part of what makes me uncomfortable.

The other part comes from my philosophy classes. Off and on for about twenty years now, I've been teaching Introduction to Philosophy and Philosophy of Religion classes; and a part of both courses always involves some work with the traditional rational arguments for and against the existence of God. While we're doing this, I ask the class this question: "What do you think counts as evidence against the existence of God?" It's a standard question, everybody asks it; and I always get the standard answers—those things which have troubled people throughout the ages.

The students say that injustice, the suffering of the innocent, natural disasters, disease, the prospering of evil, and things like that count against the existence of God. And they're right. Creation is ambiguous, and these things are hard. But there is almost always at least one student (usually a very good student), who has something more to say.

That student says that a good argument against the existence of God is the fact of all the different religions and churches, and of all the disagreements and differences and even violence within and among religions and churches who claim to know the same God, and to love that God, and to follow that God. It seems, the student insists, that if there really were one loving and powerful God who has revealed himself to a bunch of people, then those people, at the very least, would agree as to who this God is, and what he wants. This is also a very good answer to my question. It doesn't say everything that can be said, but it's a good answer.

And Jesus prayed to the Father that "They may all be one...so that the world may know that you have sent me." It seems that Jesus was right, but we have missed something. These students look at the people Jesus was praying about, at those who have believed through the life and ministry of the Christian Church, (they look at us, at their experience of Christianity) and they see—at least on the surface—just exactly the opposite of what Jesus prayed they would see. It seems that we are shooting ourselves in the foot.

To be sure, there's more to all of this than meets the eye of a Freshman Philosophy student. There is, even now, a real, if dreadfully fragmented, unity among us Christians. But a lot more evidence of this unity needs to meet the eye to give a really convincing response to this particular argument.

All of this bothers me. It bothers me that who we are, as a part of a divided and divisive Christian community—that who we are can reasonably and sensibly be used by intelligent people as an argument against the existence of the very God we insist is at the center of our lives and the heart of the universe. Bummer.

Another thing that bothers me about all of this is that there doesn't seem to be much of anything like an answer to it. That is, I know of no neat collection of clear and simple things that you, or I, or anybody else can *do* that will *fix* this, or even make it noticeably better. And folks here at St. Nicholas' know this with more depth and pain than most. It can be awful.

The fact that we Christians are divided among ourselves by denominations, by factions, by parties, by history and by theology; as well as the related fact that we are quite often not in the least loving, or even decent, toward one another—these seem to be realities we are pretty much stuck with. But these realities should at least bother us. They should at least effect our manners and our prayers.

I hope that we can pay more attention to, and pray more regularly about, the reality of our divisions; and realize that there is something deeply troubling about them. (Sure, this is nuanced, and there are times when we have to speak the truth we have found in love to one another; and a glib and facile pretending won't do at all. But that's a different sermon; and I'll preach part of that different sermon next week). But I do hope that the next time we feel really right, or really smug, or the next time we decide to be contentious or insulting or condescending just for the heck of it, that we can remember what my students always say; and what Jesus said on the night he was betrayed. And maybe we can think about what small things we can do to help.

That's not going to fix it, but that's alright. Ultimately, it's not up to us to grant the prayer Jesus prayed to the Father. The Father will have to take care of that.

Which, given our success in the matter, is very good news indeed. And the Father is faithful, and he will grant the prayer of the Son. Until then, it is up to us to hear Jesus' last words before the darkness, to be bothered by them, to reach for their fulfillment, and to make the vision of that prayer a vision we take seriously.