

Lent II February 28, 2010

Probably the oldest and most abiding image of what it means to be a religious person, a person seriously engaged in the business of being connected with God, is the image of a journey. This is perhaps the most universally *shared* religious image—after all, journeys are part of virtually every religious tradition and almost every religious story—to name a few: Gilgamesh, Moses, the Buddha, Confucius, Mohamed, and more; their stories all have journeys in them. At the same time, it is also one of the most universally *resisted* religious images. We know that, if we're on a journey, then we still haven't arrived; we aren't there yet; everything isn't settled; and there are still places to go and things to discover even in our walk with God. We don't like that.

Also, being on a journey means that if we stop, if we allow ourselves to be content with where we are now, or if we get off course, then we can become lost. So we are both drawn to this notion of journey, (it rings true); and we pull back from it; often wanting to have the travel over and the destination at hand. That tension is a sign of a good image. Keep it mind.

The heart of Luke's Gospel is a journey—it's Jesus' journey from Galilee to Jerusalem. And on that journey the people following Jesus begin to learn what discipleship means; they discover what *the journey with Jesus* is like. In the same way, by paying attention, we can learn a bit of what *our* journey is like, and what it will be like.

Today's Gospel talks about one moment on Jesus' journey, one moment I want to look at carefully and with some imagination.

Luke says that some Pharisees came to Jesus and said, “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.” Suddenly, Jesus’ journey has become dangerous. Suddenly, there is some real risk involved; suddenly, decisions matter.

Jesus had to decide what to do. He had several options. He could go back to where it was safe, that was a real possibility. Or he could take a detour, he could go around where the danger was and still try to get to his destination. He could stand still, paralyzed. Or, he could hold fast and continue on his way—he could remain faithful to his journey.

The journey got dangerous. This is important. It can also be difficult to relate to, at least at first. Way back then, it was easy enough to see what it meant. Jesus had enemies who wanted him dead. Dangerous meant dangerous. Also, for the first four centuries, (and in a surprising and growing number of places even today) Christians faced all sorts of persecution, some of it truly dreadful, for the sake of the faith that was in them. What it meant *to them* for the journey to get dangerous was also easy to see.

Now, I’m convinced that even for us, and even here and now, our journey at times turns dangerous; I’m convinced that what Jesus and the first Christians faced—we face, albeit it in a different, gentler, and more nuanced way; in ways we can’t predict, in ways that, while they may seem petty to those who risked their very lives for the faith, are nonetheless powerfully real for us. Certainly, all that we hold dear can be at stake. And we have pretty much the same options that Jesus had when he heard that Herod was out to get him. But, again, this is far from clear, and far from easy to recognize. (I do want to say that the tendency of some to squawk about Supreme Court rulings about school prayer as persecution of Christians is not what I’m talking about.)

So, rather than give a list, I offer a couple of stories that have helped me get at this business of our journey becoming dangerous. I don't know where the first story comes from—but I think it was told about somebody famous. Anyway, the person said that he had had a vision, and that in this vision he had finally learned what judgment was like—what it meant to be judged by the Lord.

What happened in the vision was simple: At the man's death, Jesus appeared to him and showed him the scars on his hands, his feet, and his side. Then Jesus asked the man one question, the same question he will ask each of us. Jesus asked, "where are *your* scars?" Not, 'what did you accomplish?', not, 'did you keep the rules?', not 'what did you believe?', not 'were you good?', but simply, 'Where are your scars?' There is wonderful insight here.

And if we do not understand the question, or if we have nothing to say, Jesus will ask again, more clearly. He will ask if our society was so just, and our cultural so moral, and our economy so compassionate, our brothers and sisters so prosperous, our institutions so exemplary, our choices so benign, and our world so friendly | | that we could live in these, and move in these, and be at home in these for a lifetime as a baptized servant of the crucified Lord, and have no scars to show for it—no signs of conflict or struggle, no marks of discord or pain.

The Lord will ask if our relationships were so undemanding, if our neighbors were so lovable, if our appetites were so mild, if our prayer was so easy, if the power of sin was so tame, and if love was so simple, that we could hear him, and follow him, and allow him to be both the source and the goal of our journey, if we could do that and bear no wounds from it.

And judgment doesn't follow this question. This question, 'where are your scars?' this *is* judgment—for by it we can see if we have lived fully—if our journey was true; or if we turned around, or took detours, or simply stood still, when things got dangerous. | | Where are your scars? Good question.

That's one story. The other is about Justin Martyr, one of the earliest Christian philosophers, (he died, a martyr of course, around the year 165). Justin is best known for his efforts to defend the Christian faith from the intellectual and social criticisms that were brought against it in the second century. But this story isn't about that. This story is that one day a catechumen came to Justin with a problem. Catechumens were people who were preparing for baptism. In those days, this period of preparation could last for two or three years, and during that time a person's whole life was scrutinized carefully—to insure that he or she was living, and intended to live, in a way that was consistent with membership in the Christian community.

This fellow's problem was his job. You see, there were plenty of perfectly legal and generally respectable jobs in the Roman Empire that the Church had determined Christians simply could not hold. These included such things as the silversmiths who made the pagan gods, the bureaucrats and public officials who arranged for the pagan festivals, the soldiers, various sorts of merchants, and a host of others. We aren't told which one it was, but the fellow who came to see Justin had one of these jobs.

So he had to decide what to do, and he didn't like his choices. He wanted baptism, he loved the Lord and was irresistibly drawn to the Church; but he *needed* his job. And his family needed his job; and he was doing pretty well.

He was stuck, and he was frustrated and he was angry. So he made his case to Justin, and, after giving all the arguments he could muster as to why he should be an exception, as to why Justin should find him a loophole, he finally offered the crowning blow, the irrefutable point: “What am I to do”, he asked, “I must live.”

And Justin Martyr answered, “Must you?”

Sometimes the journey gets dangerous. There’s no telling in advance what that might look like, and there’s no predicting when it might happen. But remember, the Lord wants what is really, and deeply, and honestly, the best for us. And he knows that, sometimes, it is best for us to get scars; and he knows that, sometimes, even our best excuses are not good for us. So he calls us to faithfulness—to courage, persistence, and perseverance, in our journey with him, and to him. For it is that path, and that path alone, that leads to life.