
WORD MADE FLESH

Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Freedom of Forgiveness*

Isaiah 50:5-9; James 2:14-18; Mark 8:27-35

Today's texts speak of the freedom to express forgiveness without regard for one's own shame or honour. This freedom comes when faith is no longer a mask for self-interest -- and this often includes the abstractions of religion -- and has become that disposition of action which the Bible and the Church call love. Love is a response to the person standing before us: a response that calls forth healing where there are wounds, a response that calls forth the fullness of life. Jesus Christ, in today's Gospel, marks the pathway to such a disposition: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."

Why must we lose our life? What does it mean to lose life for the sake of Christ?

One outstanding feature of cultures in the Mediterranean region and the Near East -- in the ancient world and in our own day -- is that they are organized around honour and shame. As a feature of other cultures, we easily grasp the consequences for family, community and civil life when honour and shame occupy the central position. There is little room for forgiveness. While the Gospel is spoken in such a cultural context, Jesus Christ is pointing to the deep grasp this concern for honour and shame has on the very being of our person. It is common to construct our self-image through the honour we acquire and the shame flowing from our failures and sinful actions. Isaiah says that in the Lord God we are no longer creatures bound by honour and shame. For that reason, "I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard..." A disposition grounded in the love of God is not controlled by honour and shame. Grounded in God's love one is free to forgive, free to let go of all concern for honour and free of shame. The Apostle James, reflecting on faith born of the God of love -- God, the lover of creation -- gives us the litmus test: "Show me your faith apart from your works (your response of love), and I by my works will show you my faith." For James it was clear that faith in the God of life, who's presence is "in the land of the living," as today's Psalm proclaims, will be expressed in the actions of blessing and actions which heal the wounded of the world.

We are called to let go of our self-understanding rooted in honour and shame. We are called to let that way of knowing oneself, die. This is to lose one's life (one's imagined life) for the sake of Christ, the incarnation and redeemer of life. Only then will we "walk in the presence of the Lord, in the land of the living" as Christ did and calls all of us to do.

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