

FINDING GOD'S PEACE

Pentecost 20 – Cycle B

Job 23:1-9, 16-17; Psalm 22:1-15; Hebrews 4:12-16; Mark 10:17-31

A few months after my father died, my friend Janice's father died. Needless to say, I had no difficulty in expressing my sympathy to her: my own father's death had been overwhelming, and my feelings of abandonment were seemingly endless. I was numb, and was unable to believe in the God I had been taught was a saving, healing, redeeming, and merciful God. Consequently, Janice's reply when I told her how sorry I was about her father's death took me aback. She said, "You know, if it weren't for my faith in God, I would be unable to cope with this. Dad's death is a terrible shock, but I know we'll be alright. God is with us, even in our tears." She was still a teenager, but somehow had developed a mature faith that was equal to the challenge of what I had already learned was a life-changing experience, the death of a beloved parent. Her brief testimony bewildered me and even made me a little angry; but I have never forgotten it. It was the gospel I needed to hear, in spite of my utter conviction at the time that God was absent from the human condition, and especially mine.

In many ways, Janice is much like Job in today's First Reading and like the author of Psalm 22 which follows. For Job and the psalmist, their suffering is real, and the challenge of feeling isolated, abandoned, and vulnerable is seemingly unbearable. But interestingly neither of them lets go: Job intuitively knows the God he cannot find as a righteous judge who will, when the opportunity comes, acquit him of any wrongdoing that is understood by his friends to be the cause of his suffering. His friends accuse him of having secret sins and Job's suffering is their proof that God is punishing him. His struggles notwithstanding, Job knows in his bones that there has been a terrible mistake; that God is still God and that, at length – he knows not when – there will be an opportunity to make his plea before the One whose righteousness is beyond refute.

And the psalmist, who feels forsaken, nevertheless prays to the too-silent God who he or she also knows as *defender* and *deliverer*. "In you our ancestors trusted," we read in Psalm 22. "They trusted and you delivered them...And it was you who took me from the womb and kept me safe on my mother's breast."

Somehow in the walls of doubt and hurt and anger we erect when things go wrong in our life, cracks appear, these passages tell us; and through those cracks, faith and healing and calm *slip through and in*: anxiety and stress are relieved, and we are made whole and given peace; peace we have sought, but could not find. Thanks be to God for the Janices and Jobs and psalm-writers in the world who remind us of those cracks, especially when all we can see are our solid walls.

In our Gospel two weeks ago, John came to Jesus concerned about an outsider who had been successful in casting out demons in Jesus' name. Jesus, we learned in that reading, did not want to close the circle to newcomers; that they were, in fact, welcome, even though he did not call them individually as he did the original twelve disciples.

In this morning's Gospel, another outsider approaches Jesus and wants to enter the community of blessing Jesus heralds. The question he asks is translated "What must I do to inherit eternal life," but the question is more accurately "what must I do to live in the reign of God when it comes." And it is in the context of living in the reign of God that the conversation ensues between Jesus and this outsider who, we learn later, has many possessions.

Interestingly, the man appears to be a good candidate for discipleship: when Jesus lists for him several of the Ten Holy Laws, and even adds "You shall not defraud," the man realizes he qualifies. "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth," he exclaims. Jesus then places another condition on the man, something uniquely characteristic of the reign of God Jesus proclaims – economic justice! It would be self-contradictory for one of Jesus' disciples to profess that all are equal before God but to live a life of privilege: the call to discipleship is a call to be poor not only for the sake of our neighbour's wellbeing, but also to be poor for the sake of the integrity of the gospel; to walk the talk; to *truly* love our neighbour as we love ourselves. It is a difficult teaching, but for Jesus to have ignored the obvious with this candidate, the profile of faithful discipleship would have lacked authenticity and all who followed would be misled.

What is fascinating in this account is that Mark gives his readers two notes: first of all, Jesus looks at the man and *loves* him. He looks at the man and sees him as a beloved child of God, his understanding of the one thing the man lacks not interfering with his love for the man. This is unconditional love.

The second note Mark reports is that the man was shocked and then went away grieving. I expect Mark intentionally leaves us to ponder how the man's story ended, because he knows that among his readers there are people of means who want to follow Jesus and who struggle with the gospel's radical call. The love of God is transformational we learn in story after story in the gospel accounts; and Jesus loves this man with many possessions with that same transformational love.

After the man goes away, Jesus continues the lesson with the disciples, and they become quite agitated. We don't know where precisely the word of God cuts them (to borrow an image from this morning's Second Reading), but they ask one another in desperation, "Who *can* be saved?" Jesus overhears their question and answers them with an assurance worthy of Saint Paul: "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; with God all things are possible." As much as we seek God's peace, Jesus is saying, in the end it is God's peace that seeks us.

And now, think again of Janice, and how, even in the poverty of *her* grief she was able to minister to me in *my* grief. Think of how, at length, I recognized her testimony of faith as God's peace. And then, think of how we can all bear God's peace when we love and care for our neighbour as we love ourselves, walking the talk; when we welcome newcomers into our lives; when we share our food and our wealth and our time, when we work for social and economic justice; when we are servant disciples who seek God's peace not for ourselves, but for our neighbour.

It is on the way that God's peace finds us, the way of love and justice, the way of bringing near God's reign.