

Easter 4

Our second reading today from the First Letter of St. John plays hide and seek with us, for it promises us a future, but a future which is mysterious. First of all, it tells us that we are already, here and now, God's children because the Father loves us, but then it goes on to say that it has not yet been revealed what we shall be in the future. But then it gives us a peak, a hint, about this mysterious future. In the future, it says, we shall be like God, for we shall see him as he is.

What could that possibly mean? Like God for we shall see him as he is! I presume that this text is talking about the absolutely ultimate future, that is, the future when our entire world has reached its end point, for our faith teaches us that the world began and will have an end. And here we are being told that at that end of the world we will be like God himself because we will see him as he is.

We are here promised a kind of deification, for that is the meaning of the phrase, 'we will be like him, like God.' But what does that mean? This much, I believe, it is safe to say. It does not mean that we will be absorbed into God so that our personal identification

will cease to be, that we will lose our identities, our personalities. A phrase comes to mind: “union differentiates.” I believe this phrase reflects Teilhard de Chardin’s thinking. We tend to believe that the more things unite, the more like each other they become, until at the end of the process the two things are so alike that they are absolutely indistinguishable from each other. They become one, but they do so only because they have lost their own identity. Not so, this phrase says. The more like things become, the more differentiated they become. A paradox.

What is our experience in this matter? Do married people become more unlike each other or more like each other? Does their union make them more different? Whatever the answer to that question may be, it is the conviction of Christian faith that the work of creation, that of our world and ourselves as part of it, is headed for completion, for fulfillment, and not annihilation. Even naturally speaking, that seems to make sense, for why would the divine energy set this whole magnificent process in motion if its end were to be extinction? No, it must go towards its own perfection and completion, and that includes us, since it appears that we are such an important part of the process that the process itself seems to depend on us for its movement forward.

The last sentence in this second reading today is extremely interesting. It gives the reason why we will be like God in the end. We will be like God, it tells us, because we shall see him. We might ask: “Can simply seeing God do that for us? Can simply seeing God make us like Him?”

In ch. 3 of his Second Letter to the Corinthians St. Paul recalls the passage in Exodus 3 which says that Moses had to put a veil over his face when he spoke with the people because his face was so brilliant after his having talked with God face to face. But then Paul changes this image. He now says that the veil is on the face of the people of Israel when they read the SS and will not be lifted until they come to Christ. But we who have turned to Christ, Paul says, now gaze with unveiled faces on the glory of the Lord and are being transformed in the same image from glory to glory. He then goes on to place all unbelievers under the same veil. The god of this age, he says, has blinded the minds of the unbelievers so that they may not see the light of the Gospel, which is the glory of Christ who is the image of God.

So Paul is telling us that in seeing Jesus we see God. Jesus is the very image and glory of God, and in seeing him we are looking with unveiled faces on God. He concludes by saying, “For God

who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to bring to light the knowledge of the glory of God on the face of Jesus Christ" (4:6). If this sounds too complicated, we could take one simple sentence from St. John's Gospel (14:9-10) in which Jesus says to Philip who has asked to see the Father: "Have I been with you for so long a time and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the father? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?'" Clearly, Paul and John are on the same page, but Paul presents this thought by means of the image of seeing the face of Jesus which he calls the very glory and image of the Father. And we can see that face because our belief in Jesus has removed the veil that covered our faces. We see Jesus face to face, and in doing so we see the Father face to face.

Today's Gospel has presented the Lord to us as the Good Shepherd. Today we are also asked to reexamine our lives as Catholic in such a way that we become more conscious of our responsibility for our environment. Today we are also asked to pray for vocations to religious life. How are we doing, we who look with unveiled faces on the face of Jesus which is in fact the face of God? Is looking at Jesus enough to change us, to transform us, to make us good shepherds of our environment? That is the

claim of this letter of John. By seeing God we will become like him. Perhaps we can believe that that will be the case on the last day when the unveiling is of an extraordinary kind. But now, in our everyday lives? Have we met people who seem to be looking at the face of Jesus by the way they live. Do we see a transformation of their lives? Certainly we see the opposite of that all around us, although all of us will have our own examples of what seem to be the major violations of such a divine transformation. One such violation reported in the paper today caught my attention. Our government agencies are separating mothers and children on the Mexican border (700 such cases since last October), and once the children are separated it is very hard for the mothers to find them again. This is stuff right out of Stophie's choice. This is Gestapo policies. This is worthy of the WWII concentration camps. May God forgive those in our government who authorize and enforce such policies! May God lift the veil from their faces so that they can see the inhumanity of such actions! But, at the same time, may we recognize the goodness of ordinary lives around us, lives lived quietly and steadily in a stream of goodness to the neighbor. And may our lives be among them! May we look more and more at the face of God, with all veils removed, and be transformed in our daily lives.

