

Sunday 14

July 8, 2018

About ten years I met a fellow Jesuit whom I had not seen for many years. In our early years he was just one year ahead of me, but his later career took him to places like Iraq and Jordan. He is one of those people who could be just about anything ethnically, facially. He could pass for being east European or Indian or even Chinese. As we talked, he told me about meeting one of our teachers of many years ago and how this now very elderly Jesuit had begun to apologize to him for the kind of intellectual training he had given him. But he stopped his former teacher and said to him, "Paul, you have made me what I am today." He meant that positively. That is, he wanted to thank, not blame, this former teacher for all that he had taught him.

As you know, that is not always the case. Many of us blame our teachers and parents and the elders in our lives for having failed us. Sometimes we even want to take all our own shortcomings and lay them upon these people's shoulders. "It is not my fault that I failed here and there or that I didn't do this or that, or that I have this problem with alcohol or with relating to my spouse or children," people sometimes say. "It is all their fault, those who molded me when I was young." At times there is some truth to such

statements. There are bad parents who leave awful scars on the souls of their children. There are bad teachers who do the same. But there ought to be a limit to this blaming of others. No matter what others have done to us negatively, ultimately we have to take responsibility for ourselves. We may have been given a bad rap, we may have been short-changed. But the question for us ultimately becomes: "But what did you do with it?" All of us play with the hand that God has dealt us. All of us also play with the hand that those who formed us, parents and teachers, have dealt us. Maturity comes when we recognize that fact. Even greater maturity comes when we can forgive those whom we once saw as having been able to do better by us, because we now begin to recognize the limitations with which they had to work. And now we hope those who come after us will recognize our limitations and forgive them and us who lived within them.

When we begin to think and live in this way, we begin to imitate the God the Scriptures outline for us. To understand all is to pardon all, according to a French maxim. But God understands all. Therefore God pardons all. That sounds good and true and beautiful. Isn't that the message the Lord teaches us when he tells us to forgive again and again? Not seven times but seventy times seven times. Isn't that the message of the parable which sums up

Christian faith, that of the prodigal father who never gives up on his wayward son and runs out to meet him when he finally returns? However, today's readings focus not only on God's everlasting and all-embracing love and forgiveness but also on our recalcitrance, on our ability to resist this divine offer of forgiving love.

In our first reading God says to Ezekiel: I know that they may reject your message, which is my message, for their hearts are obstinate and hard, but because you are there they will at least know that a prophet has been among them. So the emphasis here is on God's persistent fidelity despite human recalcitrance. The message from the second reading is a bit different. It stresses the fact that our human weaknesses in attempting to present God's love to humanity can make that love shine more brilliantly, for it becomes clear who is the source of the message and its power. It is God, it is Christ, it is not Paul, it is not the messenger.

But today's Gospel clearly focuses on human recalcitrance with respect to the divine messenger and his message. Jesus is rejected in his hometown. All three synoptic Gospels give us this story of his rejection in Nazareth. Of course it foreshadows his ultimate rejection of him by the leaders of his people. We could therefore say that from the very beginning of the Gospels Jesus is presented

as a suffering messiah. The cross already looms large in these opening chapters of the Gospels. It is clear from day one that this man is going to be rejected.

The reason for his rejection at Nazareth is given by the Lord himself in today's story: a prophet is never accepted in his native place and among his own kin and in his own house. Thus in Matthew's account we are told that "he did not do many mighty works there because of their unbelief." In Luke's account Jesus points out that Elijah and Elisha performed their miracles for non-Jews, and this reminder so infuriates his hearers that they try to kill him. But in Mark's account we get inside the Lord's head. Mark tells us that Jesus marveled because of their unbelief. That means that even though Jesus knew that prophets are not accepted by their home folks, he was still amazed at the unbelief of his fellow citizens of Nazareth.

Isn't that a contradiction? If Jesus knew that prophets are always rejected by their own, why did he, a prophet, expect anything else? Why then is he surprised when it happens? Do we know of anything like that in our own experience? For instance, we know something will probably happen, but we cannot really believe that it will happen. For example, we all know that everyone dies, yet

we find it hard to believe that we are going to die anytime soon. Maybe it is different when we get seriously ill. But in good health we can deceive ourselves, indeed in some way seem open to the idea that we are going to go on as always. Is that something like Jesus' surprise at what he knew to be the case, that prophets are rejected by their own?

In a way our ability to resist divine love is unbelievable. It is like a single finger which can block out the sight of the sun. How can we do that? But we can and we do. Let us hope and pray that we will not do that, that we will be open and not recalcitrant when the Lord Jesus walks into our lives with his invitations.