

Sunday 16

There is a story which Pope Francis tells in his book, *The Name of God is Mercy*, about a woman who came to see him when he was working in a parish in Argentina. The woman had children but had been abandoned by her husband. She could not find steady work and eventually had to resort to prostitution in order to feed her family. But she continued to come to church and the parish sought to help her by giving her food. She came one day and asked to see him. Padre Jorge thought she wanted to thank him for the food packages the parish had sent her. “Did you get them?” he asked her. “Yes, she said, “but I have not come to thank you for them but for continuing to call me “senora.” The pope remarks that he learned from this experience how important it is to respect the dignity of people. The fact that he continued to address her politely was more important to her than the food the parish gave her.

Our society here in the USA has pretty much abandoned titles. I was pleasantly surprised a few months back when the editor of America magazine, a Fr. Matt Malone, wrote a column about this abandonment of titles. He is a man in his forties and grew up here in MA, but he has very old-fashioned views. He feels embarrassed to call strangers, especially older strangers, by their first names. I

take it he would want to call them Mr. or Mrs. Smith, or sir or madam. But he is fighting a losing battle. We are now called by our first names in doctor's offices and by insurance firms seeking our business. Some of us don't find this strange. I remember asking my sister about this use of first name by strangers. "That's my name," she said. "Why shouldn't I be called by it?" But some of us don't feel that way. When we are called by our first name by strangers, we feel as if we are again in the first grade and the teacher is calling us to go to the board. In any case this woman was very pleased that for Padre Jorge she was still Senora even though her present occupation was not an enviable one. She felt respected.

We see something similar in today's Gospel. The scene is a very human one, one which we can all imagine and perhaps have even experienced. We have been busy with people. Maybe we hosted a party and now the last guests are leaving. We are exhausted and even though we love our guests, our friends, we cannot wait for the last ones to leave. It is time to clean up and kick back. Finally, the last ones leave and we begin to clean up. We finish it and get ourselves something to drink and sit down and turn on the television. And the door bell rings. They are back. Their car won't start; they don't have a cell phone, and they are worried about their children at home. Of course we help them, and not unwillingly, yet

at the same time we would rather not be back in action on their behalf. We just want to sit down and relax.

That is the gospel scene. The disciples return to report to Jesus about the mission he has sent them on. They are excited but tired. So Jesus wants to take them aside so that they—and he--- can rest. They are surrounded by crowds. They get into a boat and depart for a unknown place. But the crowds on shore know what they are up to and meet them when they disembark at the unknown place. “Oh no” may have been the reaction of some of the disciples, but it is not the Lord’s. He looks at the crowds waiting for them to come ashore and he is moved with pity for them because they are like sheep without a shepherd. Scripture scholars tell us that the verb used here, moved with pity, describe a reaction which takes place in our stomachs. In other words, Jesus reacts physically to the crowd’s appearance. These people are really lost, abandoned, and he feels their lostness, their abandonment.

We all get the impression that in times past, in the Middle Ages, and even in our own country in the 1700s, people were still afraid of God and feared “the loss of heaven and the pains of hell,” as we say in our Act of Contrition. We know that there was a famous Protestant preacher in the 1700s named Jonathan Edwards who

lived here in MA, and the phrase we associate with him is the title of one of his sermons, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." There are still people who fear the loss of heaven and the pains of hell, but I suspect they are a minority. Today many people today will tell you quite openly, even if you are clergy, that they don't practice a religion and are agnostic, and so on. All fear of God is out the window. But if we don't believe in an angry God, could that also mean that we don't believe in a loving God? If we don't believe in God's anger, maybe we don't believe in his love either.

If that is the case, we need to take today's Gospel reading more seriously. We believe that Jesus is the presence of God among us, and we are here being told that he is moved by human misery. And if he is, then God is too. Jesus weeps when he confronts human misery. But if he does and if he is God's son, then so too does his Father.

To believe this is to be changed. To believe that the infinite God is a God of Mercy, that that is, as the pope tells us, his name, is to be changed. It will make us get up when that bell wrings and our friends, the last ones who have just left, are back again asking for our help. Like the Lord, we will feel their need in our own bodies.

“When he disembarked and saw the vast crowd, his heart was moved with pity for them, for they were like sheep without a shepherd....”