

The Inclusive Community

Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time

August 23, 2009

Homily of Anthony T. Padovano

Covenant

John 6:56-69

We all know what it is like when we disappoint people who mean a great deal to us. We have experienced at times a disagreement with a friend that we know will end the relationship. We have memories of those we thought were on our side and who betrayed us, hurt us. Pain from an unexpected quarter is especially bitter.

Jesus deals with this situation in today's passage. His words do not heal or reconcile but cause division. The division is in his own disciples and it runs so deep that the community is never again reunited.

John speaks of how "difficult" this is as some disciples of Jesus find him "unacceptable." They are "complaining" about a message they find "offensive." Hear this line: "many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him."

There is pain and sadness throughout this passage. The word "betray" is used and a simple inability "to believe" in Jesus anymore.

The turmoil and tragedy occur because Jesus redefined himself. He is not only a healer and even possibly the Messiah but the bread of life whose words have "spirit and life" in them. He is the way to God, someone who can bring eternal life to those who find nourishment in all he is and all he says. Jesus defines himself as closer to "the living Father" (a description not used elsewhere in the Gospel) than anyone had suspected or affirmed. He has been "sent," "come down from heaven" with a mission to help people "live forever." Jesus describes himself as absolutely unique and even essential for a deeper understanding and relationship with God.

These claims divide the disciples. We see in John's Gospel, at the end of the first century, that the Christian community is building its faith and worship around Jesus as a center. This faith has a liturgical dimension, a ritual centered around bread and a communal meal.

The disciples are confronted with a dilemma. This Jesus, now Christ, stands with God, “the living Father” in a union that seems to undermine the monotheism of Judaism. It goes against the distance Judaism carefully cultivates between God and us. Jesus is available to us as bread and wine, a presence at the table of discipleship and faith, a brother of ours sent by and inseparable from “the living Father.”

It must have been devastating to watch so many friends walk away. He knew their names and faces, took journeys and meals with them, taught them and shared memories and hopes with them. Now Jesus asks them to walk with him across a bridge too far for many of them. They did not all leave in anger or turmoil. Some left in sadness, heart-broken and lost.

Jesus is so shaken that he turns to the core and anchor of his community, to the Twelve. This is an unusual reference for John who does prefer the term “Twelve” in his Gospel. In one of the saddest lines in the Gospel Jesus asks them; “Do you also wish to go away?” He is not sure they will stay. If they go, the entire community may be lost.

Peter answers for the Twelve. “Lord to whom can we go?” John Henry Newman found this line fascinating. He observed that Peter does not cite the miracles or the preaching of Jesus as a reason to stay with him. Rather, Peter cites the meaningfulness of his relationship with Jesus, the friendship and the faith that followed from that. If Jesus is wrong, very wrong, then nothing is right. We have all had those moments. Peter has an emotional and a belief relationship with Jesus. He is a disciple indeed.

The passage ends on this strong note, committing the community to find its future in a relationship with Jesus. It will not be an institution or a creed that rescues us, not even a sacrament or Scripture. It will be a sense that Jesus brings a truth with him, a beauty, a meaning that is available not in the words really but in “the spirit and life” the words bring with them.

We do not become friends with one another because of the words the other shares with us but because we sense a “spirit and life” in those words and even in the silence, the presence, the company of the friend. It is what happens to us when the friend is near, the comfort, the trust, the sense of bonding and loyalty. It is this that makes friendship worthwhile and a treasure. It is the joy at merely seeing the friend.

Peter says that this is why he will stay. Without a relationship with Jesus, the joy of his life will be diminished and the meaning of his life may be lost.

He will remain because he now sees that he has a love for Jesus deeper than he had realized. He stays out of love. There is, my friends, no other reason to stay.