

The Inclusive Community

Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 19, 2009

Homily of Anthony T. Padovano

Compassion

Mark 6: 30-34, 53-56

Today's reading invites reflection on three themes which the passage surfaces.

1. Jesus struggling with his emotions.

The two verses immediately preceding today's text are grim, even grisly. John the Baptist has just been beheaded. A soldier brings the head on a platter and gives it to the young woman. Imagine being there for that! The young woman passes it to her mother. The final words before today's verses explain that the disciples of John take the headless body and lay it in a tomb. The last word is "tomb."

The opening scene in today's setting has the disciples returning to Jesus after his having sent them out on their first missionary journey. They went without money and with few possessions. They actually heal people and call them to a change of heart for the better. Their return is filled with enthusiasm, joy, suspense, gratitude, excitement. Jesus is very subdued. He has heard what happened to John the Baptist. He is devastated. He is alone when he gets the news. The return of his friends and disciples lifts his spirit but he is still troubled, deeply troubled.

All that Jesus says is "Let's get out of here and go somewhere where we can gain our balance. Let's just rest, a quiet place, no ministry for a while, no preaching, no healing. I'm just not sure about a lot of things. It is time to slow down, take it easy, get our bearings."

2. Celebrity and Compassion

Mark says that there was no way for Jesus to get away. Crowds follow him, watch his every move, beg for help in their broken, troubled lives. They have just lost a great leader, John the Baptist, and now they rush to Jesus as a last, wild hope. Mark says Jesus did not even have time to eat. The pressure is intense. The return of the disciples and the needs of the crowd helped Jesus overcome the shock and deep trauma of John's death. But the cost

is heavy because people are relentless and Jesus is exhausted. He says to the disciples: “Let us take the boat, go across the lake. I need time and tranquility, something to eat and some time for us to talk about our next step.”

They make it to the boat and on the water, things are still and silent for awhile. When they get near the shore they see there is a crowd gathered there as well. There is no place where Jesus can hide or retreat.

The reaction of Jesus is a key, an insight into his character and his emotions. He does not act, as most would, with annoyance, frustration, exhaustion, anger. He does not feel trapped, beleaguered, hunted down, no longer in control of his own life. He responds astonishingly with compassion. He sees needs and forgets his own. He teaches and he is ready to heal them, to hear all the pain and agony of other lives. It is not easy to hear this endless litany of sorrow and anguish and suffering. It is not easy but people are like sheep without a shepherd. And Jesus is determined they will not get lost. He will not let them feel abandoned, marginalized, cast aside. They have had enough of that in their lives.

Today’s reading passes over the verses that follow about the multiplication of bread and the walking on the water of a turbulent sea as Jesus and the disciples depart and cross the sea again. The narrative picks up across the lake as the boat comes to land and the disciples are sorting out who this Jesus is; not only a teacher and a healer but somehow lord of nature, who can multiply bread and still the waters of a troubled sea.

As they land, the crowds are there again. Perhaps Jesus sees in them now the inevitability of his own death. John the Baptist attracted crowds but none this huge, this often. And they killed him. This much power coming to one man, a critic of the establishment, a friend of the masses, unleashing forces the political and religious leaders cannot control, this is dangerous, deadly- for him. Even so, he will not stop. He disregards the peril for himself. He is filled with compassion.

It is not often that celebrity leads people to be more compassionate, to think less of their own needs and to give themselves to others, not so much for the adrenaline rush all the attention brings but because they see others and care for them.

Jesus rushes into the crowds. It is tumultuous, Mark says. When he goes into villages, the disciples cannot even purchase food. The marketplace, the mall of that day, is filled with stretchers.

3. Healing

Healing is the last word of the text. In English it says the crowds were “healed.” It is also the last word in the original Greek text. The Greek word has a meaning the English does not. “Esozonto “ in Greek means both “healed” and “saved.” I think this connection is noteworthy. To be “healed” or “made well,” in Greek is to be “saved.”

To save someone is to make that person well, not just to promise a better life but to deliver it now. To save people is to make them feel good about life, to be at home with their self. Salvation is not tied up with another life after death or joining a religion but being healed.

We go with Jesus in this brief passage from his emotions and exhaustion to compassion, healing, the acceptance of his destiny, the willingness to be a celebrity as long as he can heal. He does not believe that God wants people only to know the truth, perhaps an abstract truth that will save them. He insists that God is a healer and that unless people feel they are worthy, unless they are made well, they are not saved. Salvation is not just words and creeds and formulas, sometimes cheap or painless rhetoric. Salvation is making people well. It is giving people chances with life, their life, they might have missed. It is sending people home healthy, whole, dancing, joyful, singing. God's people are not grim or giddy purveyors of mantras and slogans. They are those who have had their humanity saved, their lives rescued, made well by a God who is not so much a God of truth as a God of life. The God of life has compassion on us, not because we are in the right church but because we are who we are. None of these healings happens after Jesus checks out church attendance and orthodoxy. They happen simply because of who these people are, valuable in their own right. Every act of compassion less than that is a betrayal. Every leader less than that, is not worth following.