

The Inclusive Community

Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

August 9, 2009

Homily of Anthony T. Padovano

The Nearness of God

John 6:35, 41-51

Understanding Christ as a way of understanding ourselves and understanding God is the hallmark of Christian faith. A Christian is someone who believes that the identity each of us has and the character of the God we affirm is tied up in some inextricable way with sorting out who Christ is.

Today's Gospel reading from John shows us Jesus revealing something about what he believed of us and revealing what he believed of God. What he says is shocking, exhilarating and radical all at once.

If you were a Jew in the audience that day, you would have accepted the idea of God as sovereign, distant, judgmental, perplexing. You would also have believed that God is good, loving, a miracle worker, someone who rescues us from our own desperate moments. God might appear at any moment or speak on some occasion but God was the awesome mystery in a heaven beyond our reach.

All of this is beautiful, consoling, healing and helpful.

Jesus, however, stresses an aspect of ourselves and of God in this passage that startles and upsets his audience. He tells them that God is not so much the one who saves us from our wretchedness but the one who reveals our worthiness.

Christian spirituality is divided today between those who stress their feelings of unworthiness before God and those who are convinced that God loves us because we are worthwhile. Both approaches have their own validity. The distinction lies in whether we feel unworthy for the most part or accepted for who we are. Put another way, there is a world of difference between the parent who believes that the love of the parent makes the child good and the parent who sees the worthiness of the child primarily.

A God who reveals our inner goodness is different from a God who reveals our sins and cancels them out so that we can be worthy of God. Again, both have their importance but the way we stress one approach rather than the other changes everything.

A God who reveals is different from a God who saves even though at moments God might do both.

When we fall in love with another human being, it is because that person makes us feel worthy and helps us see a goodness in ourselves that we had never seen.

In today's passage, Jesus says that God is as near as bread and as close as someone you know. God does not give bread. God is bread. We break bread and share it because we want the person with whom we break bread to live and to love us. A parent feeds a child because the parent cannot bear to be without the child. And the child who accepts the bread knows in the depths of its very being that it is lovable and loved and worthy and gifted. Every child knows this everytime it reaches for bread.

If God is not so much the awesome mystery but bread on our table and in our hands, then God is for us, near us, not only inescapable but someone we would never want to miss. Who wants to live without bread? Who does not yearn for someone to break bread with us in generosity and tranquility, in friendship and love?

Some of the Jewish audience reject what Jesus says. Bread is too common to be a sign of God. And you, Jesus of Nazareth, you are too near us, too known for us to accept you as a sign of God. We know your father, your mother, the house you lived in, the synagogue you attended, the childhood you had, the mistakes you made, the games you played.

You ate at our tables and you visited our homes. All that is too familiar for us to see you as the bread of life, as the way we see God and find ourselves acceptable. Can God be someone we know? A child, a lover, a friend, a neighbor who breaks bread, a father who holds us in his arms, a mother who gives us bread every day. Surely, God is not so mundane as this, so human, so near, so familiar.

Jesus says that God is a teacher. God is the one who teaches you that you are worthy of bread and worthy of life and worthy of love. Whoever teaches you that, helps you see God and does God's work. God is such a simple presence. God surrounds you with nearness and familiarity and yet you keep looking elsewhere. It is the mother who gives you bread, who brings you God. It is the father who lifts you on his shoulders who shows you the world God made. It is the lover who tells you I cannot live without you, I can never recover from losing you, it is this lover who brings God's love so near that it breaks your heart with its grandeur and it lifts you out of all the unworthiness you felt about yourself. It is the friend who makes us feel so confident that we tell the friend what we hide from everyone else. This friend is God's revelation that our story is worth telling, our heart-aches matter, our sense of isolation is what the friend wants to take away forever.

In the verses immediately preceding today's reading, the crowds near the Sea of Galilee ask Jesus for a sign of who he is and of who God is and where they fit into all of this.

Jesus says that God is bread and friendship and love-making and fishing and weaving and cooking. God is the child whose mother and father you know and the one standing in your midst whom you may have missed. God is the teacher who makes you dream and hope and gives you the courage and confidence to go on without faltering. God is this little community here and all we bring to it.

Jesus tells them that God will not let us die in the wilderness of our own unworthiness, that God brings us bread, not punishment, that the glory of God does not need diminished human lives for that glory to shine. The glory of God is humanity fully alive. Does anything make a good parent feel better than a child fully alive?

It is not the tears of the child a parent treasures but the smiles and the laughter and the unrestrained joy.

God gives us bread not because we are hungry but because we are worthy. It is not the food we eat that ends our hunger. It is the sense that those who give us bread believe we are valuable.

The friend makes us feel that the bread is not worth eating if we take it and leave the table. The friend, God, the bread of life, makes us feel that our absence from the table is a loss for God and for the world.

If we are worth a shepherd seeking us when we are lost and a father holding us in his arms on our return and a woman lifted to her feet when her executioners are banished, if we are worth all that and we know it, then we have found God and ourselves and Christ and love. You see when all is said and done, you and I are the bread of life.