

The Inclusive Community

Third Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

Sunday, January 25, 2009

Homily of Anthony Padovano

The Nearness of God

Mark 1:14-20

There are three themes from today's Gospel, that we might explore together.

The first of these is the mystery of nearness

Mark has Jesus speak his first words in verse 15 of chapter one in this the first Gospel

Jesus has left Galilee, comes to the Jordan River, hears John the Baptist and is baptized by him, all without a word.

Then Jesus spends over a month (40 days) in the wilderness with Satan and wild beasts and angels. Quite a scene! Still, not a word.

John is arrested and Jesus returns to Galilee in the North. No word, even now. He returns home after a series of incredible experiences: Jerusalem, the Jordan, baptism, the wilderness, temptation, the journey home.

Alone. Silent.

Now, in verse 15, he speaks for the first time. There are no remaining recorded words of Jesus until Mark writes these. Not in Paul. More than 40 years after Jesus is gone, we get these first words.

What does he say?

“The time is now. God has come to be near you.”

The Latin and Greek texts of this sentence use the verb “to get near.” God is getting closer and closer. You cannot miss God now, Jesus is saying. Can you not see and sense the nearness? How could you miss it? God is getting close. Open your eyes and your heart. God is nearby. And God comes only with good news. No fear. No threats. No judgment. Just near.

How beautiful, consoling, unexpected those words were and are!

Nearness

When you and I meet someone we care about, someone who comes with good news, someone who is on our side, we want to be near that person. In the same room, in the first row, close enough to touch.

Is not this what love does? A baby wants to be as close to a mother as the baby can get. And a mother wants the baby in her arms and near her heart.

People who love each other want to be near to each other. Close enough to hold hands. In the front seat of the car together. At the same table. In the same bed. People who love each other do not want separate tables, separate beds, separate places at the theatre, distant seats on the plane. Often, people on a plane will notice that husband and wife are in separate seats and will ask them if they would like to be near each other. They offer to change seats so the couple can be near each other. Everyone who sees this happen finds it is as it should be.

The mystery of nearness.

Jesus is telling us that love makes nearness imperative. You do not want to be out of sight, out of hearing, out of touch with those you love.

This is the first thought Jesus gives us about God. God wants to be near us. The God Jesus preaches about finds distance devastating. God is a God of nearness because God is a God of love.

Notice the body language we use when we do not like or when we fear someone. We create as much distance as we can. But if we see someone we love we run to that person. A child shrinks in fear from those who threaten and runs in wild abandon to the parent whom the child loves – for safety, for security, for serenity.

Jesus tells us that the only God worth having and knowing is a nearby God. A God who brings us love.

The second theme in today's Gospel is intuition.

After Jesus speaks the words we just considered, he walks along the shores of the Sea of Galilee. He sees Simon first, then Andrew his brother. Simon is a Hebrew name; Andrew is Greek. The first call for a community Jesus gives is a call to Hebrew and Greek cultures. They are casting nets to fish and he says, "Follow me and together we shall bring people, not just fish, into our boat."

Immediately, Mark says, they left their nets and their boats and followed him.

There are now three, as the Christian community begins. Mark says that they do not go much farther when he sees James and John, also brothers. James and John are not fishing on their own as Simon and Andrew were. They are part of a company, a conglomerate. They have employees, “hired men” Mark says. James and John are mending nets, not casting them. Mark says he just called them; no specific words are quoted. And they followed him. Mark does not say they followed immediately. That departure may have been more complicated. But they too leave everything.

Why would these four good men, talented, successful, working leave so quickly? Intuition. Something in them responded to something in Jesus which made them know that whatever was missing in their own lives, he would fill.

They wanted to be near whatever he was about.

How does a child know a mother is trustworthy? Intuition, chemistry, dynamics, instinct. As adults, we meet some people and we know they are right for us. We sense that if we miss them, we shall miss something in our lives that must not be missed.

We follow them because something of us is mysteriously present in this person.

No one tells us. We just know. And so they did.

The third theme is commitment.

When you find someone you know is right for you, when you want to be near someone so that distance is painful, lonesome, you leave everything and everyone for them. You become committed together. You become faithful together. You become a community together.

As today’s Gospel passage ends, five men walking along the Sea of Galilee begin the Kingdom of God.

There are no women yet. But in the first chapter, just ten verses later, Mark speaks of Simon’s mother-in-law. Simon is married, of course, and his mother-in-law is desperately ill. Before her, Jesus had expelled demons. She will be the first miracle, the first physical healing.

Jesus is portrayed by Mark as beginning his ministry by casting out demons and by healing: casting nets of safety to those demonized by evil spirits; mending, not nets, but broken bodies in healing.

What an incredible ministry!

What a wonderful way to live!

Look at all Mark has told us. God wants to be near us. We are called to be near all that is love. We must be committed to this. And if we are, then we shall banish the darker angels in our nature and be mended by the healing presence of God.

Everything the Christian community was meant to be is caught in these few lines. All that God is, is love, in these verses. A God not worth being near is not a God worth loving or serving.

The Church must never make God distant. If we must choose between a distant Church and a nearby God, Jesus tells us that we must let the distant Church go. Only the God who is near us is worth it. One of the things a nearby God compels us to leave is a distant Church. The message of Jesus is not about a Church but about a God who calls us from everything except love.