

3rd Sunday of Easter cycle C

The headline could have read “Christian Students sue for 1st Amendment Rights” or “Christian Students sue for right to free speech.” But it didn’t; the headline on the front page of last Monday’s paper read “Christian Students sue for the right to *be intolerant*.” It is one of the great ironies of our culture today: when the primary principle by which you operate is tolerance, what do you do when dealing with people who ask that you be tolerant of what you consider to be their intolerance? The issue arose at Georgia Tech, where some students are protesting the university’s policy on tolerance, which essentially shuts them up about certain issues regarding human sexuality, at least shutting them up as far as campus activities. Presenting the assertion that marriage is meant by God to only be between one man and one woman was deemed an intolerant view; and tolerance and free speech collided, as they are wont to do at times. Certainly, it is a situation with which the Catholic Church can identify, the Catholic Church being the great lightning rod attracting criticism of all things pertaining to orthodoxy of belief in the Christian faith. The irony, of course, is that the more people wish to scream about how closed-minded the Church is, the more you can’t help but wonder: how open-minded are they, really, about the Church? These issues with the Church began immediately in its earliest days, as they tried to silence Peter and Paul and all the apostles, and prevent them from teaching “in that man’s name.” The Church’s challenge to live holy lives collided with their own views, and they tried to kill the nascent Church rather than listen to what she had to say about the power of her Savior. It is an attitude found throughout all of history: how many fantastic stories have circulated through the years about the Catholic Church: the mysteries, the secrets, the strange lifestyles of those religious people, all locked-up and cloistered; who knew what was really going on in those rectories, and what schemes were being dreamed up in the Vatican? And it continues today in our culture, with incessant criticisms about the Church’s teachings on abortion, and birth control, and capital punishment, and economic justice, and the role of men and women in the Church, and the definition of marriage. But what there seems to be little of, is an attempt to really understand what the Church teaches, and why; because understanding might invite not only tolerance, understanding would open the door to conversion.

In the Gospel passage this weekend from Luke, the disciples again encounter the risen Jesus, and they are still struggling to comprehend the meaning of the resurrection. Is Jesus a ghost? Are they seeing things? Instead of rejoicing, they’re startled, and terrified, and troubled. Then, Luke writes, “He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures.” They needed to understand what God had been doing since the fall of man, when he first promised Adam that a Savior would one day come to his rescue. They had to understand what God was doing with the call of Abraham, the choosing of Moses, the sending of all the prophets, in order to grasp that all of this was leading up to Jesus’

resurrection; that all of those things would serve as the proof to them, that the resurrection is real, because it was more than predicted, it was promised; this is what God had been up to since man first rejected him. Yet they couldn't understand, until Jesus opened their minds. Up until then, man had largely been closed-minded; certainly that's what led to Jesus' rejection by his own people. Being closed-minded is not merely being stubborn in one's beliefs: being closed-minded means to resist information, and to avoid information which might serve to change one's opinions, and one's life. It settles for generalities, rather than looking for specific facts. It not only does not want to change, but is afraid of change; it's afraid of being wrong, because being wrong would dent one's pride.

So, in our culture today, we hear a lot about being open-minded. But the way the world speaks of it today is not the kind of open-mindedness that Jesus provided then, and still provides his followers with today. True open-mindedness is not relativism, the tenet that one set of beliefs is as good, as valid, and as true as any other. When one is genuinely open-minded, they listen to what others have to say, weigh the merits of what others say, but then make critical judgments about the veracity of the information. True open-mindedness seeks knowledge, and truth; it is humble enough to admit errors in past ways of thinking. It considers a diversity of opinions, but in the end embraces truth. And part of the path to embracing the Catholic faith is open-mindedness, whether one chooses to become a Catholic later in life, or if one chooses every day of his or her life to embrace the faith which they were given in infancy. The danger in seeking knowledge about other belief systems comes from the failure to have a firm grasp of Catholicism; the answer for one who's faith is on shaky ground is not so much to avoid all challenges to the faith, but to be open to finding answers from the Church. And even when our faith is solid, it must still be solidly informed. When you have politicians expounding that the Church values only the lives of unborn babies and not the lives of women, when you have people purporting that the Church that holds up as saints Mary and the Magdalene denigrates women just because it sees them as having a distinct, but critical role in the economy of salvation; when you hear that the Church won't welcome some group of people through its doors, when actually the call is not to stay away, but to embrace God's will by rejecting sin; you have ran into a closed mind that doesn't want to hear what the Church really says, because truth not only informs; it challenges, and when embraced, it converts.

In the reading from Acts of the Apostles, Peter points out to his listeners how they have historically and continually resisted knowledge about God. How they handed Jesus over to be crucified: they liked the miracles, but not the claims Jesus made to being the Son of God. They had him killed, chose a murderer to be released rather than this man whom they knew was innocent of any wrongdoing; but Peter himself points out, that they acted

out of ignorance. But, the time had come for them to abandon their ignorance, and hear the story and accept the truth. That they could not deny the miracles meant that they could not deny the facts of Jesus' life; that they could not deny what God spoke through the prophets meant that they could not deny what the Messiah was sent to achieve. If they would open their minds, they would understand the message; if they would open their hearts, they would embrace the Gospel, and the Savior whom the Gospel revealed.

Saint John wrote in his first letter, that the way we may be sure we know him is to keep his commandments. "Those who say, "I know him," John wrote, but do not keep his commandments are liars, and the truth is not in them." The fullness of truth and of revelation resides in the Mystical Body of Christ here on earth, and those who reduce that revelation to mere speculation may claim to have open minds, but are not really open to the fullness of God's revealed truth. Easter is just a lovely story to many and heaven a comforting belief; but to those who understand that Easter occurred so that we could repent of sin and that dwelling in heaven in a choice made by each individual and demonstrated through consequent actions, Easter is a call to belief, and belief is a call to change. Does God call us to open our hearts? He certainly does. We are to open our hearts to all those in need, to our enemies, our persecutors, our detractors. We are to pray for them, sometimes provide for them, assist them, and if we ever get the chance, instruct them. But we are not to open our hearts to evil; rather, only to mercy. Does God call us to open our lives? He certainly does. We are to open our lives to the possibility that we can, with his grace, avoid sin; and that we can find satisfaction even while denying ourselves some of the pleasures of this world. But God doesn't want us to open our lives to every experience imaginable; he wants us to open our lives up to the joys of heaven. Does God call us to have open minds? He does; but he does not want us to open our minds to just anything; and certainly not to falsehood; he wants us to open them up to his revealed truth. Keep the word of God; keep his commandments; follow his laws, and his ways. The love of God, Saint John wrote, will be truly perfected in him who does those things. The love of God, and the possibilities which follow, will belong to the one whose mind is open to receiving the Gospel message, and who then embraces that message with his life, and who will never settle for anything less than the fullness of faith, and the fullness of truth; found in Christ Jesus, and still being handed down through his Church.