

4th Sunday in Lent cycle B

It's Rorschach meets pop culture: not really a question; not actually a poll, not quite a game. Just two names, or two titles, or two anything's set right next to each other, and you do the choosing. Superman or Batman? Cats or dogs? Baseball or football? McDonald's or Burger King? Summer or winter? Ginger or Mary Ann? To a generation of people my age, for whom reruns of "Gilligan's Island" were as much a part of the daily rhythm of life as were spelling tests and Sally, Dick, and Jane, it doesn't even have to be a full sentence to for us to understand the context: which do you prefer? The over-hyped, high-maintenance movie star, who we all know was supposed to be more beautiful and glamorous than her island-mate, or the down to earth, perky, wholesome farm girl from Kansas, who was every bit as beautiful and just a whole lot nicer. I think you can figure out how I would vote. To all of these choices, there is no right or wrong, no better or worse. The choice is understood to boil down to a split second matter of preference. The choice reveals little to nothing substantial about the person, and yet at the same time says something about who we are and what we like: by knowing that I prefer winter to summer, for example, one can surmise that I don't care for the trappings of the summer months: the heat, the sunburn, the bugs, the humidity. By disclosing our preferences, we slowly disclose who we are, as well as what we really like, and sometimes, what we really want.

In today's Gospel reading from John, Jesus in his discourse to Nicodemus says "the light came into the world, but people preferred darkness to light, because their works were evil." There are a lot of reasons to prefer darkness to light, and I generally do, especially being a fan of the short days of winter. Darkness is cozy; we sleep better in the dark than in the light. Darkness offers a unique beauty as the little dots of light punctuate it and offer contrast: give me a sky full of stars over cloud gazing any day. But our Lord is not speaking of the physical darkness that covers half of the world at any given time, but of the spiritual darkness that covered man from the time of the fall of Adam and Eve. As important as *that* they preferred it is *why* they preferred it: because their works were evil. I listed all sorts of good things about darkness; but what's darkness's downside? In the dark, our sight is limited, in both the physical and spiritual sense. Light invites us to look out, far beyond ourselves; darkness tempts us to close in on ourselves, to only consider my immediate needs, my own self. Many people will attempt to get away with things under the cover of darkness that they would never attempt otherwise; darkness symbolizes the tendency to try to do that which is covert, which others don't know about and which we don't want them to know about. As our Lord himself said, evil does not want to be exposed; in fact, one of the scariest places for a culture to be is at that point where evil occurs out in broad daylight, because then the culture may be so used to the wrongdoing that it isn't even recognized as such anymore.

Sin has its sway in our world and in ourselves because it appeals to something within us; sometimes we even make reference to our "dark sides." It's not so much the actions, as the disordered passions motivating the actions that allow rebellion against God into our lives. Most things are good in moderation; sin happens when we want to allow some pleasure to become unreasonably pursued. Or if the appeal is not to pleasure, perhaps it may be to power, or security. But the dysfunction of sin happens when the spiritual darkness, which is the absence of the light which is Christ, pervades our lives. In the dark, as I said before, the world becomes smaller; we see less of everything else, but become more acutely aware of ourselves. In spiritual darkness, our choices and preferences start to close in: it becomes all about us, what we want rather than what God wants; what pleases me right now, rather than what perfects me right now.

Jesus also said to Nicodemus, “as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up.” What in the world could Jesus, the Savior, have in common with the bronze serpent, who symbolized the evil the Israelites committed, evil so bad that it called down God’s wrath upon them? The serpent which Moses mounted on a pole, of course, was to remind the Israelites of what they chose; their wickedness prompted God to send the seraph serpents which then bit them; they could only be saved when they admitted, personally and not just communally, that their own sin invited the punishment; they could be saved when they would turn to that pole, as an acknowledgement of what sin actually does, what it actually causes. And when we see a crucifix, with the Son of Man, our Savior, nailed to it, we should do the same: think of the wrong we have chosen which necessitated the sending of our Savior; remember that it is by Jesus’ saving actions, not by our own merit, that we are ever to be healed from sin. It reminds us that no matter how alluring wrong-doing may seem at the time, it cannot satisfy; nothing which arises solely from the physical pleasures of this world can ever totally satisfy: overeat once, and we’ll be hungry yet again; drink all we want, but we will again become thirsty. It reminds us to just choose better, because God has preferences for us too, and those things he wants for us DO satisfy and DO last, if we cultivate and nurture them. Because what God wants for us is to come to faith. His desire is that we experience repentance, and follow the light which is his Son, and live pure, chaste lives; his preference for us, is that we gain his kingdom. The image of his Son nailed upon the cross is a constant reminder that the choice is before us; the life of faith is simply one of cultivating the right choices, day in, day out, until the ultimate choice— heaven—is secure in eternity.

I know that a lot of people think the whole notion of the crucifix is depressing; why remind ourselves of Jesus’ suffering and death, wouldn’t it be more uplifting to focus on his resurrection and ascension instead? The point of the crucifix is not to depress us, but to remind us, just as did the serpent mounted on the pole reminded the Israelites: this is what evil causes. The difference between the crucifix and the bronze serpent is, that the Crucifix also reminds us of how much God loves us. Choose well and wisely between life with him, or life without him. God so loved the world that he gave his only Son; how much do we love God in return? Enough to resist concupiscence when we struggle with all sorts of temptations? Enough to obey his commandments, and follow his laws, even when they’re challenging for us? Enough to deny ourselves, even legitimate pleasures at times, because we’re mindful of how much the Son of God denied himself as he won for us our salvation? Enough to live now for others, and for God, rather than just for ourselves? Quoting Saint Paul from this weekend’s epistle, *because of the great love he had for us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, God brought us to life with Christ*. Our faith now becomes a measure of the love we have for him. Paul wrote a lot to his audiences, including the Ephesians, about how their adherence to the Jewish law had no power to save; salvation is not from works, he wrote, so that no one may boast. But the salvation gained by Jesus will be embraced by us by way of our choices now, and they are laid down before us each day. And this is no frivolous pop-culture quiz. This is our eternal destination, but the choices are placed before us day in, day out, in rapid-fire succession at times: obey, or disobey? Serve self, or serve others? Hold onto grievances, or show mercy? Remember what is really being placed before us: Creator, or creation? Heaven, or hell? Spiritual light, or spiritual darkness? Unlike the pop culture choices, there is a right and a wrong choice here. John reminds us in his Gospel that God chose not to condemn the world, but to save it; may our choice—our choices—be to embrace that salvation.

© 2006