

20th Sunday in Ordinary Time cycle C

A wine connoisseur, I'm not. If you set before me two glasses of wine, I would not be able to tell the difference between a 1995 and a 2005, between a wine from Italy or a wine from France, or one from California; frankly, if you tossed in a blindfold, I may not be able to distinguish a white from a red. But a cola connoisseur, I am: I can pretty well distinguish one cola from my favorite brand; and I won't publicly take sides in the cola wars, but anybody who's ever seen my office knows wherein my preferences lie. To a lot of people, pop is just pop; they might, maybe, make a distinction between regular and diet. But set a diet Pepsi and a diet Coke in front of me, and let me tell you, there is a difference: to my taste buds, one is a nectar, and one is a drain cleaner. OK, maybe not that drastic. But that is the nature of being a connoisseur, be it of cola, of wine, of computers, of cars; to be a connoisseur is to be one who can make distinctions, and who then forms definite preferences based on the distinctions which they can make.

One of the reasons Jesus came among us was for us to be able to make distinctions, and not of consumer products, but of people and of belief systems. Today's Gospel is a challenging discourse in which Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace, announced that he came not to bring peace, but division. And not just any division, but difficult, painful divisions: father against son, daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law. It almost seems to fly in the face of the 4th Commandment, which tells us to honor one's father and mother. Division among family; division among friends; maybe animosity among co-workers; this is what Jesus says he brings. But we know that Jesus teaches us not to engage in personal hatred; he warns that anger is the beginning of murder; and he spoke repeatedly of the peace of the kingdom, hence he is known as the Prince of Peace. So what is this division of which he speaks? Well, it is not war; Jesus probably could have started a war between some of his zealous followers and his equally zealous opponents, but did not do so and clearly did not want to do so. It is not fighting: Just because daughter-in-law is divided against mother-in-law doesn't mean that they are called to have screaming matches when the family gets together for dinner. And it's not about cutting people out of our lives solely because they don't share our beliefs; we are to be in the world, even while not of the world. What this division is, is a distinction which must be made: a recognition that the Christian life we are called to live is not like all other lives; that our priorities are not the same as other people's priorities, and that when our belief in Christ clashes with the world, the world must take a back seat to our Savior.

Ours is a faith which was formed, over time, by divisions in the human family. Every child of Adam did not necessarily become a child of Abraham. The ancient Egyptians enslaved and then drove out the Israelites, not vice versa, and it was the Israelites who passed through the sea untouched by the waters, not the Egyptians. There was a clear difference between prophets such as Jeremiah, and those who opposed him, calling for him to be put to death because he was demoralizing the soldiers and the people; demoralizing them because he was chosen to deliver an unwanted but very true message about how their fate was being sealed by their unfaithfulness to God. In the letter to Hebrews, it was written “consider how he endured such opposition from sinners, in order that you may not grow weary and lose heart.” Jesus was divided against his opponents, who would not accept his divinity, who put no stock in his miracles, who resisted his authoritative teaching because they were not interested in changing their lives to accommodate truth. And there will be a divide between the believer and the non-believer, even today, as so many of those who do not believe take as a personal affront to themselves the Christian call to holiness. The mainstream attempt going on today is not so much to get Christians to change their religion as it is to get them to change their religion’s beliefs: conning us into believing that we may keep our Savior, but discard what he taught us.

But why, if the Church’s vision—and Jesus’ vision—is one of peace and reconciliation among men, why should we try to create these divisions; or never mind creating them, why even accept them? Consider these reasons. One: What we believe matters. It matters, because we follow a Savior who told us it matters, that there is a path which leads to heaven and a path which leads away from heaven, and we will make the choice here on earth which path we will follow, and he told us what it means to be on that path. We have had it revealed that baptism is the beginning of our salvation, and so it matters whether or not we are baptized. It matters whether or not we confess our sins; it matters whether or not we believe in the Son of God, because he and he alone is the way to salvation. The next reason why we should have divisions: because of the detrimental influences on our faith which may arise from other belief systems slowly encroaching upon us. One’s Christian faith cannot remain pure if one becomes a true hedonist, because life is not about the pursuit of every available pleasure, it’s about the pursuit of eternal life with God. One’s faith cannot be pure if one becomes a relativist, believing that all belief systems are of equal value, because there is one God, and therefore one truth, and our purpose is not to find the supposed truth which we like the best, but to find the truth which comes from God. And one cannot be a strict materialist, and believe that all of the

universe is simply so much interplay between matter: nothing more than a bunch of cells and atoms bumping up against each other in an on-going dance of attraction and repulsion, because we are more than just a bunch of cells: we have immortal souls which will transcend death. Thirdly, we make these divisions because this will distinguish the dross from the genuine product. Jesus said to his disciples: “I have come to set the earth on fire, and how I wish it were already blazing!” Fire purifies; fire tells which is the true precious metal, and which is not part of the gold. Distinctions are necessary so that we may tell if we are truly following the path to our salvation, or whether with neither reason nor revelation we have simply convinced ourselves that we are saved.

There is a fine line between condemning people and rejecting sin; we must never do the first, but must always do the second. Our place is not to pass judgment on others—God alone can do that—but rather to pass judgment on ourselves. Nonetheless, once we embrace this faith as true, and revealed by God, it will create a division between us and those who have not embraced it. Jesus calls us to have a uniquely Christian lifestyle, one which struggles against every sin which could separate us from him, who is our life. We are called to have an outlook on life and death that is not like every other outlook, and we are called to this because Jesus wants us to have a uniquely Christian outcome; an outcome which, we pray, may yet be arrived at by others. A lot of people, if you asked if they want a Coke or a Pepsi, would say “they’re the same thing”; but we connoisseurs know the difference. Much of the Christian and non-Christian life will look the same: we work mostly the same jobs, eat mostly the same foods, have the same illnesses, and face the same temptations. But we know there’s a difference. Jesus is the Prince of Peace, and in the end, those who live in him will know a unity unlike any they ever knew here on earth. But before the peace of the resurrection, there was the pain of the crucifixion; and before there will be consummate unity in heaven, there will be division here on earth. Jesus came to divide so that we could be spiritual connoisseurs; people who know the difference between a life lived with faith, and a life lived without it, and who believe with every fiber of our being that knowing Jesus will make a huge difference in the end.

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