

7th Sunday in Ordinary Time cycle C

There's an old saying, that "one dog barks at the moon; the other dogs all bark at the barking dog." And if you've ever had a dog, you know that almost inevitably, once one starts barking, so will most all the others within hearing distance soon be barking, too. But, let us not disdain canines for not having the intelligence to make a rational choice as to whether and when to bark, because I'm not sure that we people are much better. Witness those who will rail against uniforms, based on the premise that it stifles their individuality, all the while being slaves to the fashions of their peers; or even, get three people to stare up at something at the top of a building, and see how many other people start craning their necks to see what's up; and the more who are looking, the more will start looking. The fact is that it's built into our nature to have leaders, and to look for leaders. We're social creatures; we look to belong to a group. But within the group must be some who will forge the way for the rest: take risks, make plans, get things started so that others may be inspired to follow. Whether it's to be the first to sport a particular fashion or to be the first to stare up at the top of building, it all begins with the first dog who barks.

In the reading this weekend from the Acts of the Apostles, we hear the account of Saint Stephen who is in amongst a group of people who most definitely do not want to be led, at least not by the likes of one of "those Christians." Luke writes that Stephen looked up intently to heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, and he said "behold, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." Can you imagine, people seeing this man staring up so intently at the skies and making this proclamation, and NOT looking up, and NOT asking where? Where do you see this? How could THEY not even be tempted to look up to see such a spectacular sight? Or even look up to verify that there isn't anything there? They were hearers—they knew what Stephen was saying—but they weren't about to become followers, they didn't look because they didn't want to see, they did not want Stephen to be proven right. They didn't want to get the message themselves, and so they covered up their own ears, to block out Stephen's voice. They didn't want others to receive this message, and so they cried out in a loud voice, so that only they could be heard, and not him, so that no others would follow his lead, either. And then, they did not want Stephen himself to experience or enjoy this vision, and so they rushed upon him together. It's not just a matter of them not wanting to follow this new Christian way; they didn't want Stephen himself to follow as Jesus was leading him.

But why? What was the big threat, what was the big deal? As a religious people, as Catholics we should be sensitive to the issue at hand, even while rejecting their means.

The issue at hand was blasphemy; blasphemy is serious to us, and it was serious to these Jews whom Stephen was in the midst of. But, most of the early followers were Jewish; why was Stephen's attestation to Jesus' divinity blasphemy for some, and not for others? It would have been blasphemy if Jesus had not shown them that he is God, the only Son of the Father; it seemed like blasphemy to them because they discredited the works he did, *so that* they would not feel compelled to follow his way. Some of them did not want to be led, because it would be leading them away from them being the power, them being the authorities, them getting to make all the decisions for the people; and some no doubt didn't want to be led because they were so secure with where they were at. Some did not want to be challenged by this new way: it required learning, and faith, and it seemed to take some effort. And some didn't *want* to change; some feel so strongly that they must be in the right that they will not under any circumstances consider: am I right? And I know that many would say, this sounds like Catholics: the Church doesn't want us to be led away from the Church, doesn't want us to go off and consider other teachings and other religions; we're taught that this is the faith, and that we must not do anything to endanger our faith or to take us off the right path. And that is true, but the danger comes not from being exposed to non-Christian beliefs, but from not being well grounded in our own faith; a weak, uninformed faith will be vulnerable to clever attacks and to untruths. The key—and this is a very imperative key—is to know our faith. We have to live our faith, know it intellectually, know it in the context of history; know not just the “what's” but the “why's” as well. We are members of the ultimate social structure, the Mystical Body of Christ; if ever a group needed to be ready to forsake individual pursuits for the good of the rest, it is us. How good of Christians can we be, though, if we will not be led by legitimate authority, authority given us by Christ for our instruction and for our unity? How can we grow in our faith if we do not allow ourselves to be challenged; if we don't have questions, and then find the answers to those questions? How can we be followers, if we, ourselves, never change, never grow in holiness?

Part of being a member of the Mystical Body is being led; and that means having leaders. And there are some who don't want to be “told what to do” in any circumstances, including by the Church. But to reject leadership is to promote self to the position of being one's own highest authority; to reject those whom God sent to us to lead is to exalt autonomy over being part of the Mystical Body of Christ. Being Christian means being challenged sometimes; we may not end up facing a barrage of stones such as Saint Stephen did, but people will certainly question us on different aspects of our faith. Remember that we're not called to a blind faith, but to an informed faith; not understanding a teaching doesn't mean we're free to reject it, nor does it mean that we can convincingly adhere to it; it's a call to learn more about it, inform our faith with greater knowledge. Heaven knows the resources are there, two thousand years worth; the

antithesis of true faith is culpable ignorance: I know I ought to learn, but don't want to take the time. Those who take the time end up with the stronger beliefs. And as for change; well, none of us is perfect yet; all of us can improve and become better Christians. And maybe we don't want to change our imperfections, but are we at least willing to pray for the grace to change, or the grace to want to change? Having a truly open heart isn't about tolerating every thing and every belief; it's about being open to what God wants to do—what he wants to do in us, and with us, and through us.

Jesus, in the great prayer he prayed before his passion and which is recorded in John's Gospel, said "righteous Father, the world also does not know you, but I know you, and they know that you sent me." The world does not really know Christ; if it did, then all would follow him. But like Saint Stephen, we who do know must be prepared to lead others, and be to be led by others at the same time. There are, in the world, many who only want to validate their own perceptions of things, who will not listen to reason or history or acknowledge miracles occurring before their eyes. But, as it says in the book of Revelation, let the hearer say "come"— come, Lord, and lead me on the path to life eternal. There are those who simply want to be left alone, to not be bothered with doctrines and teachings and revelation; but then there are those who thirst for God's truths; and these, too, say "come, Lord, and fill me with knowledge of you." And there are many who just want to indulge in the various pleasures of the world, with no restrictions, restraints, and no guilt for doing what God has said offends him; but then, there are those who would willingly forsake the passing pleasures here, for the lasting treasures of the kingdom. One dog barks at the moon; the other dogs bark at him. In all likelihood, we are all being led by someone; question is, whom have we chosen to be our leaders? If we want to be led by Christ, then we should humbly submit to the leaders he has given us, and adhere to the teachings which the Church presents to us. It will, at times, lead us to new challenges, at times to new knowledge; at times, to changes in what we do and hopefully, changes in who we are. Our Lord tells us we will be given our recompense according, not to our words, or even our beliefs, but according to our deeds. May our deeds proclaim that Jesus is our leader, and that we will forsake all other things in order to follow him.

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