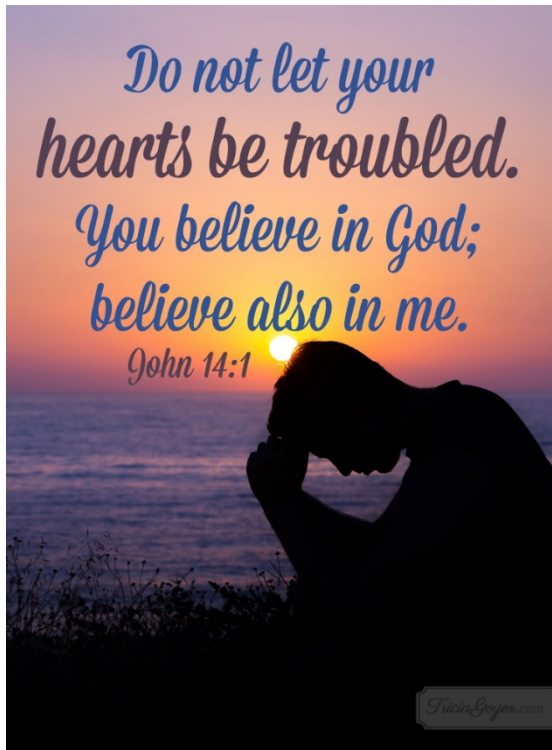


Homily for Sunday, May 7, 2023



When I read and ponder these gospel stories, Jesus always comes across as the model, the archetype, the goal to which I strive. I believe he is the potential within me, that I never quite reach, and he is also the encouragement within me to keep striving. Jesus is the complete human being calling me and every human being to be fully human as he was. In that sense, I can say he is the universal Christ.

On the flip side of the coin, when I read and ponder the other characters in these scripture stories, I see my own faith development or lack of. The mantra of first level faith goes something like this: "I'll believe it when I see it." This approach will serve you well in the physical world, but it won't serve you very well in the spiritual world. I'll believe it when I see it means I'm not gullible, I'm cautious, I'm careful, I won't give my heart over to the first person who tries to sweep me off my feet, and I certainly won't hand over my life savings for a deal that looks too good to be true.

However, in the spiritual life, insisting that you won't believe it until all your senses have been satisfied, can leave you waiting on the platform at the station for a train that is long gone. It can also make you cynical, closed in on yourself, and distrusting. I have just described the Apostle Thomas, who we heard from a few weeks ago, and the Apostle Philip from today's gospel reading. Thomas's mantra clearly is, "I'll believe it when I see it. I'll believe Jesus is risen when I can see the marks of the nails and I can feel his wounds by placing my hands in them. If I can't have this sensory proof, I refuse to believe." Philip is basically in the same boat. He says something similar to Thomas when he says, "**Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.**" Philip is basically saying in his mind, "If only God could be a physical reality and we could see God with our physical eyes, then everything would be fine. Our hearts would be calmed, and we could go about our business." The problem with this initial faith is that it constantly needs further and more spectacular proofs all the time if it is to survive. I remember a number of us first year seminarians chuckling when the rector of the seminary said to us, "Have you ever had a moment alone where you asked God to just flick the lights as an outward

sign that you were making the right decision about something big in our life?” Of course, we all chuckled, because we had all been in that stage of initial and immature faith that secretly wanted a sign. That’s the first stage: I’ll believe it when I see it.

The second stage of belief is quite different. You lose the training wheels in this stage. In the second stage of belief your mantra is more like: Because I believe, I am able to see. It’s like faith gives you a whole new perspective on the world. A priest back home calls it “putting on your Easter glasses.” Jesus’ dying and rising makes you see every little death and every little resurrection in your life, every low and high point, as not just random acts but as the hand of God working in your life. Every low point in your life, like death itself, is temporary; see it as that. Every high point in your life, like resurrection itself, is not temporary but everlasting; see it as that. They are glimpses of eternal life offered to you by God. When I think of this second level of faith, I can’t help but think of Saint Mother Teresa who claimed to see the face of God in every person she met. Because she believed, she saw. Her belief gave her the ability to see deep truths that, for the most part, go totally unnoticed in my life. And because of her work among the poor and the destitute, others came to believe and claimed to see God in her.

Jesus is like a pane of glass, totally transparent. He reproaches the Apostle Philip with, “**Whoever sees me has seen the Father.** And if you have trouble with that, then look at the works I’ve done in your presence; they don’t lie. Philip, when you saw me restore the sight of the man born blind, you were seeing the Father at work in me. When you saw the fish and the loaves multiply and feed the hungry crowds, you were seeing the Father at work in me. When you saw the lepers restored to health, you were seeing the Father at work in me. The Father and I are one, so how can you say, ‘**Show us the Father, and we will be satisfied**’?”

In the Easter resurrection stories, to whom did Jesus appear? To whom did he choose to appear? Why did some people see him and others not? He could have appeared to Pilate and his wife at breakfast. She would have said, “I told you to have nothing to do with this man!” That would have set the whole Roman Empire on its head. He could have appeared to the Sanhedrin with forcible evidence that would have set religion on its head. Or, he could have appeared to his disciples and organized a parade into Jerusalem, not on a lowly donkey but on a majestic horse like the winner of the Kentucky Derby. Ride in style. Better still, why not go all the way to Rome and appear to Caesar? He could have persuaded the emperor to declare Christianity the official religion of the Empire some 300 years before it actually happened. If Jesus would have only

done this, it would have made things much easier. Peter, Paul, many men and women of faith would not have to have been martyred. No blood would have been spilled; none of Jesus' followers would have been thrown to the lions.

This is precisely the thing Jesus didn't do. He appeared to no one except those who were open to believing. First you believe and from those new set of eyes, you see. Had Pontius Pilate or Herod or any of religious leaders been in the upper room when the Risen Lord appeared to the frightened apostles, they would not have seen a thing. Jesus appears only to those whose hearts are open, and that is what we call faith.

The Apostles Thomas and Philip are not the two brightest bulbs in the chandelier. They are like the kid in class who doesn't understand something and asks the teacher a question we were too proud to ask ourselves. Jesus, the Teacher Extraordinaire, gives the answer that the whole class benefits from. Without Thomas and Philip, we would probably not get the brilliant insights of Jesus that has formed us over the past 2000 years and are, indeed, the wisdom of the ages.

So that's how faith works. It starts with a "dummy" asking for a sign. And it ends with Jesus telling us that if we had faith the size of a mustard seed, we would be able to do the works he did and even greater.

Fr. Phil