

Homily – October 20th, 2024 – 29th Sunday in Ordinary Time



Can You Drink the Cup?

Scholars still don't know who wrote The Letter to the Hebrews, that second reading we heard. But what they do know is that, like all the other books of the Bible, The Letter to the Hebrews is inspired by God. What I find

inspirational, personally, is the part where the author says, “**We have a great high priest** (referring to Jesus) who, although he was in heaven, was never content with remaining there ruling the world from a distance. He **sympathizes with our weaknesses and was tested in every possible way we are.**” Whenever I get down, all I have to do is read that, and it becomes instant therapy for me. I can relate to God who makes so much effort in relating to me. Anyone who takes an interest in what's going on in my heart and not just my head, anyone who is willing to join me in the dark places I sometimes find myself in, is the one I have all the time in the world for. That kind of person has something to say to my life.

James and John are two people who have not yet learned how to leave heaven and enter into the suffering of the world. In fact, they want to bypass the suffering of this world and go directly to heaven, to the two best seats in heaven! They want Jesus to do their will rather than they doing Jesus' will. However, they have made big mistake in calling Jesus teacher. “**Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.**” It was dangerous in calling Jesus “Teacher,” because now they are about to be taught. Teachers are always wanting to uncover the hearts of their students, the disciples' hearts in

this case. Nothing uncovers our hearts as much as when we are voicing our desires. Desires emerge from the heart. Their desire is to assume the seats of honour when Jesus ascends to heaven in glory. What is in their hearts is power and prestige, and Jesus is the star to which they have hitched their aspirations. They want to grab the glory without first drinking the cup. And the cup is always the cup of suffering long before it becomes the cup of joy.

I had an impromptu conversation with one of the priests of our diocese this week. He will do anything to avoid the cup of suffering, anything that calls him to stretch and grow in his faith. He lives in his world of certitudes, assurances, and convictions and never budes one inch off center. He is self-assured. If you want to access him, you have to go to the center and talk only the language he talks, because he will never go to the edges of life and meet you there. He won't leave his self-created "heaven" and sympathize with the weakness of others as Jesus did. It's very hard to communicate with people like that who live in the world of rules and legalism and who are always trying to put you in their small box. He will live and die at a ripe age and no one will know anything about him except his name and that he followed the "letter of the law" to the tee. Cushioning himself from any real conversation, he hides behind the rules and regulations of the institutional Church. I suspect his prayer is the same as the desire of James and John, that is, to get Jesus to do his will rather than doing Jesus' will. What a shame that nobody will glimpse what's in his heart. St. John Henry Newman, a brilliant scholar and cardinal from London, England said about 150 years ago, "So much holiness is lost to the Church because brothers and sisters refuse to share the secrets in their

hearts with one another.” A 150 years have gone by, and as Church we have yet to learn the lesson of those words of wisdom.

A few hours later, on the same day, I presided Eucharist at a seniors’ residence, Golden Years, on the Salisbury Road. Only a handful of times in the last 27 years of my priesthood, have I felt there was no distance between presiding Eucharist and the Last Supper, even though the two events were separated by 2,000 years. This was one of those times. As frustrating as it was a couple of hours before with the straight-laced priest, presiding Eucharist with these older, fragile, and vulnerable people was absolute joy. Nothing about celebrating Eucharist at Golden Year is ever 100% by the book. There was no altar but a makeshift card table instead. No fancy linens, no choir, no candlesticks or incense, yet the Spirit moved in that room with the power of Pentecost. A woman, who is not the most stable mentally or physically was able to do what the guarded priest earlier that day wasn’t able to do—she revealed her heart. In 20 seconds, she revealed more about herself than that priest would dare to reveal about himself in 20 years. Thumping her heart three times—the tipoff that she was about to share the secret of her heart with me—she said, “It’s not the physical pain that gets me down, it’s the loneliness of not having family or friends visit me.” I made a feeble attempt to comfort her, but I don’t even remember what I said or if it even made sense. When you stand in front of an open heart-- even a broken heart—the beauty of the moment leaves you without words. I just knew, in that moment, that the high priest had left heaven and was sympathizing with our weaknesses.

The heart searches for meaning. That's what this woman's heart was looking for, not heady answers. She knows what it is to live on the edge. She knows what it is to drink the cup. Until you've been led to the edge of your own resources and learned what your real source is, you have nothing to say about the Gospel. All the seminary textbooks, ideas and words are only that—books, ideas, and words—until we've lived them, until we've taken the cup in both our hands and drank it to the last dregs. To drink the cup is to go through at least one situation in your life where you are not in control, you're not in charge, you're not right, you're not winning, you're not number one, or you're not the best and you see how you deal with that. If you can come through the other side still happy, trustful, and loving, then you have something to say. Then you're ordained. That's the real ordination. Some priests have never been ordained in that sense.

You don't have to go to seminary or theology school. You just have to go through the mystery of death and suffering, and then come out the other side better and more alive and more in love, happier and freer.

The woman whose heart aches for love and attention, the parent at the bed of a sick child, the spouse caring for another with Alzheimer's disease, the underpaid catechist who works long hours—these are the ones who have come to serve and not be served. These are the ones who have something to teach us.

~Fr. Phil