

2nd Sunday of Ordinary Time “Jesus First”

Bishop Frank Schuster

Our second reading is very brief. It is from Saint Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. All we get this weekend is the short greeting at the beginning of the letter and it is very entertaining for those who realize what is going on. He begins his letter to the Corinthians by telling them he was called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God. He says he is writing to the sanctified in Christ Jesus, to those called to be holy. Paul concludes his greeting by wishing them grace and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Why does he write this?

He writes this because, in fact, there wasn’t peace in Corinth at all. As we will see next week when we continue Paul’s letter, the Church of Christ in Corinth was separated into competing factions, one calling themselves the church of Kephias, another the church of Paul, etc. Paul’s response to the Corinthians next week will be, “Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?” For St. Paul, ministry was not about “Paul” but about Jesus Christ! Paul therefore begins his letter with a focus on Jesus at every step of his greeting. Did you catch that? Every breath of his greeting mentions Jesus.

St. John the Baptist felt the same way. The Gospel of John reports that, as John the Baptist saw Jesus coming toward him, he said, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. He is the one of whom I said, a man is coming after me who ranks ahead of me because he existed before me...he will baptize with the Holy Spirit.” St. John the Baptist makes it clear that it is Jesus who is the light to the nations, not the messenger. The light that comes from the messenger is like the light the moon reflects from the sun.

To St. Paul’s frustration, the Corinthians didn’t understand that very well. When confronted with the factionalism of the Corinthian church, Paul’s answer to their dysfunction later in his letter is Jesus’ real presence in the Holy Eucharist. We see this clearly in first Corinthians chapter 11, a chapter devoted to the Last Supper and a reminder to take the reception of Holy Communion seriously. However, St. Paul doesn’t stop there. For St. Paul, receiving Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament is not meant to just transform ourselves as individuals. In the very next chapter, 1 Corinthians 12, St. Paul challenges them that the experience of Holy Communion is also meant to transform the entire community into one body of Christ. They are a community comprised of many parts and yet called to become one body in Christ, and so are we. However, St. Paul isn’t finished yet. What does one body of Christ look like? Well, onto the next chapter, 1 Corinthians 13. A body of Christ should look like a people who, in fact, love each other! He argues that when everything else is stripped away, only faith, hope, and love remain, but the greatest of these is love. I hope this treatment of our second reading this Sunday breaks open for you the richness of what is going on.

Back to our Gospel reading, we can ask ourselves what would happen this week if we took up St. John the Baptist's invitation and allow Jesus to rank ahead of us in all things? What would this look like? Would this invitation lead us to healthier and holy living? Would this invitation make a difference in my relationships at home, at work, or at school? Would this invitation make a difference in our society or our world, in how we interact with people of different races, cultures, or socio-economic statuses? This is something to think about seriously as we approach Martin Luther King Jr. Day. What would it look like if I allowed my life to be less about me and more about Jesus?

The Catholic liturgy understands this too. Why do I believe that? I believe this because, about this time every Sunday the Church requires the homilist to step away from this pulpit, to decrease so to speak, so that Jesus can increase, becoming fully present to us in the Eucharist. I think it is healthy for a homilist to be reminded now and again that the People of God are at Church first and foremost to encounter Jesus and to receive him in the Blessed Sacrament. However, receiving Holy Communion isn't just about, "Me and Jesus". At the end of Mass, the liturgy of the Church sends us all out as one body of Christ to transform the world as Jesus' hands, feet, and eyes. All of this is to say, if we ever want to see transformation in our own personal lives, or in our family, or in our Church, or culture, or world, that journey cannot begin with my ego or yours. To paraphrase St. Paul and St. John the Baptist this Sunday, that journey begins with two words, "Jesus first!"