

FROM GIFT TO ENTITLEMENT

The first reading and the Gospel for this Sunday are, on the surface, difficult to comprehend and in some ways difficult to accept. The first reading taken from the prophet Isaiah must have been a shock to the Israelites of the day. Isaiah is telling them that God will welcome all nations of every language and custom to come and see his glory. Not only that, but he will make them ambassadors or missionaries to gather everyone together to share in his glory. And then to top it all off, God tells the Israelites that he will take some of these people to be priests and Levites! All this was just mind-boggling to the people of God. How could their God desert them or even turn against them? They simply could not understand the largesse of God in giving his gift of grace and belief to all peoples. They felt deserted, overlooked, and worst of all second-class citizens in their own country and worse, in their own religion!

All this led many of the Israelites to forget that their faith and religion was a total free gift from God. In no way did they do anything to deserve this gift; it was all due to the love of God for them. It was God who took the initiative, not them. In overlooking or forgetting that this was all a gift, they began to look upon it as an entitlement, something that was due to them, something that was theirs by right. And given human nature, those who were priests or Levites (the priestly class) began to use their rights to show how they were better than all the others who had received the gift of faith from God. And of course this led to real problems in that they began to show their power by making rules and laws for all to follow, while exempting themselves as the upper class who obviously had privileges that the rest did not have. In a word, they were the perfect Israelites; all others were way beneath them. One can only think of how this attitude still exists in every society, our own country included. We have a fallen human nature which shows itself in so many ways and touches absolutely every human being in one way or another.

At this present time in the history of our Country, there is a great problem affecting everyone in one way or another; it is immigration and all its accompanying rules, laws, restrictions, etc all of which are in serious need of being reworked or reformed to bring everything into line with modern day conditions and to show real and true love and compassion. Just listen to all the debates taking place as to what to do politically, compassionately, justly, and realistically, extricating the truth from the fiction, the facts from the rumors, the fears from the reality etc. Everyone seems to have a definite opinion of what to do.

To be sure, the whole issue has a large number of complexities, each difficult to isolate, dissect and understand. But what is most puzzling and ironic to hear is how so many Americans who are themselves descendants of immigrants to this country, are now resenting and resisting the next generation of immigrants who seek to come here. How easy it is to forget that most of us are not too many generations removed from those hearty and hopeful forebears who came to this country via Ellis Island in the New York harbor, or who were shipped here on slave ships against their will yet who have all helped build and shape the character and strength of this great nation. And we must all realize that this process is still going on and will continue far into the future. The world, like it or not, is simply getting smaller and smaller, more and more needing interdependence among

all nations, more and more needing trust and honor among all peoples and working more and more in helping each other to solve so many political and natural global problems affecting everyone.

What each of us has received as a true gift from God - the list is long! - is first of all the courage of our forefathers to simply leave all behind and with their families set out to the unknown to have a better life. Each one of us with no exceptions (unless you are a native American Indian) owes our present lives to those who went before us. But it appears that for many, these multiple blessings have slowly turned into a very real form of entitlement. This in turn makes resistant to change, resistant to sharing the blessings one has, resistant to any discussion of change and the real factors in how we live, think, and act. And sad to say, so many of those who are true believers in God, his son, Jesus Christ, and in their church slowly begin to turn away from their faith because the teachings of Christ and his church involve practicing what one believes, all of which somehow goes against their belief in entitlement.

While all this seems to involve immigration, it really goes much further than that, involving us in all our relations with others. This fundamentally comes down to the hard question: Do I live what I truly believe? It is so easy to get into the way of thinking that if I go to church on Sundays, go occasionally to confession, receive communion once in a while, know the pastor or his assistant, then I am a good practicing Catholic. If one belongs to the Rotary Club, the Lion's club or any other such organization, such thinking might make sense. But even these clubs want their members to show through their actions that they do have some principles they live by.

There should never be a dichotomy between one's belief and practice of their faith and how they live their lives at home, at work and at play. What makes this so difficult for so many is the belief that God is somehow a policeman trying to catch one doing something wrong. That is a terrible and disastrous way to lead a Catholic or Christian life. It makes one's faith and religion lifeless. God has created each individual person to be unique, no two ever exactly alike. He desperately wants to be a part of each person's life, not to catch them doing something wrong, not to do something for them, but rather to be a unique friend, enjoying life along with them, delighting to see them succeed, ready to encourage them after a failure, and in general, just to be with them and share his love with them, always hoping that love will be given back to him.

Then if one really tries this, they must also then learn to talk with their God quietly in their hearts. No one need ever know that one does this. God does read one's heart and knows exactly what one is trying to say, and above all he answers. Once one begins to talk with God it is never a one-way conversation. At the beginning of trying to do this - trying to talk with God - one will feel somewhat awkward and even a bit dumb. But in truth this is not much different than one trying to make a friend with someone whom they barely know. At the beginning it is all somewhat stilted, wrong things are said, but yet it is precisely through this process that one does develop a friendship and it will be one which will last a lifetime. So with making a friendship with God!

Hopefully these readings for this Sunday will make everyone think a bit and hopefully will help them discover how much God really does want to be a friend with each and every one of his human beings. As time goes on, one will then begin to have a lighter step, and somehow will see that ray of sunshine in their everyday life. This is not theory: This is our faith, love, and reality.

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