

## INNER VIEWS

The aim of the Gospels is never merely descriptive. It is evocative. It narrates an event to evoke in us God's reality and the promise of a healed life. The Gospel seeks to engage us so that we feel like a participant, not a spectator.

Over the years that I've been here at St. Michael's I've met a surprising number of people who were going back to school to change the direction of their career. Others are searching out entirely new kinds of work. And still others are taking time to feel out what they really want to do with their lives. Guess I shouldn't be surprised by all of this changing. For those of us who are baptized into Jesus Christ it is merely a continuation of what God has begun in Jesus.

The baptism of Jesus is one of the most certain historical facts recorded in the Gospels. All of the Gospels tell the story, but each use different images to tease our imagination into discerning its meaning. There are three images that are essential to Matthew's appreciation of its meaning in Jesus' life and in our own:

- 1) Jesus tells John, "Allow it to happen, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness";
- 2) Holy Spirit descending and hovering over Jesus;
- 3) the Jordan River.

When Jesus tells John "Allow it to happen, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness" he is asserting his preeminence. The gospel writer was concerned that Jesus would not look subservient to John. But something more is going on. "Righteousness" is God's plan to save the world. It is another way of talking about the Kingdom of God. Jesus is telling John, "It might not make sense, but trust me, because it is coming from God." In other words, "this is bigger than you and me."

In our own lives, our own times of transition, our own moments of searching for meaning and spiritual awakening, we know God's "righteousness" when we become aware of something happening for our good that is bigger than anything we could have caused. And it fits us much better than anything we've been part of before this. It's like we've been wearing clothes a size too small, and now we have something tailor made. We wear it freely and easily.

The Holy Spirit descending and hovering over Jesus is reminiscent of the spirit of God in creation (Gn 1:2) which blows over chaos to bring creation. This is a moment of new creation, "You are my Beloved Son, on whom my favor rests". This is not to a show for other people to see but a genuine moment of vocation for Jesus - a crossing over from the ordinariness of his life in Nazareth to his very extraordinary mission and ministry.

Jesus too had to discover his identity, discern God's will for him, and pursue his destiny. This is what it means to be anointed with the Spirit and power. In the later part of Isaiah we hear the great prayer of the people: how God brought them through the waters, how God's Spirit rested on them, the hope that God would "tear the heavens open and come down", the hope that God "our Father" would not stay silent (Is. 63:7-64:11). It is against the rich background of those ancient prophecies that Matthew tells the story of Jesus' baptism. Now is the time of fulfillment

## ARCHIVES SCRIPTURES

The new beginnings that we make in our own lives may not mark the fulfillment of anyone's prophecy, but they do mark the continuation of what God has begun in Jesus. To see our lives in this perspective imbues our actions with meaning. We use these tasks, these encounters - our ordinary labors- to fulfill our destiny. However menial or grand, now we can see our efforts as a transformational crossing to a greater end, above and beyond ourselves.

The Jordan River is the third image Matthew uses to bring out the meaning of this event. During Exodus, when Moses led the Jewish people out of the slavery of Egypt, it was only when they crossed over the River Jordan that they entered into the new life of the Promised Land.

The Jewish people wandered in the desert for forty years. Jesus was thirty before he was ready to cross over. God gives the awareness of our identity when we're ready to receive it.

Real progress in our life is not a goal we can strive for, as it is the result of being consistently true to our values, to what God is doing in us, and to serving that which is most true about us.

This is not so much a change of action, as it is of imagination and awareness. Jesus begins to imagine his life and his identity in a whole new way. The baptism of Jesus in the Jordan is the story of his coming into his own. And for those of us baptized into Jesus, it is the story leading us into our own, our place in the Kingdom of the Father.

Usually we only fantasize that who we are as a person might somehow be reflected in what we do. All work permits, or forces emotional and intellectual development, the cultivation of competence, integrity and fullness of being. And when we see our work as love, as service, as an extension of our self we begin to reinvent our self, our objectives and our way of functioning. We are brought to life by the grace that lets us wait intelligently while we uncover and fully encounter our particular way of being human. Like Jesus we become aware that God makes us his beloved children, on whom his favor rests.

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I am the way, the truth and the light.

Do you know what a "Cheese Frenchie" is? First of all it's fantastic. Unfortunately it will probably kill you. It's a cheese sandwich, with white bread, Miracle Whip, and American cheese, deep fried in a batter of crumbled corn flakes, eggs and milk. There's nothing like the wonder of biting into a Cheese Frenchie with its melting cheese and that tang of Miracle Whip.

In the Omaha of my teen years Cheese Frenchies were sold exclusively at King's, which was the Friday night destination for every teenager in Omaha. King's was on 72<sup>nd</sup> street, which was the street you'd drive up and down, with all your friends, until curfew. I was eating a Cheese Frenchie the first time I heard the Beatles. Talk about a spiritual experience.

As we get older, however, spiritual experiences are not as easy to come by. Our world today is much more complicated, stressed, out of control and chaotic than the world many of us grew up

## ARCHIVES SCRIPTURES

in. and it seems that we are left to our own devices as we try to make sense out of our lives. How can we become a person that we respect, one who is generous, loving, curious, open and energized? How can we ensure that our lives will create something meaningful and enduring, and leave a better world to our children? We want to be more than mere visitors in this world.

Who can we believe? Who will tell us what's going on without spinning it for their own ends?

In today's Gospel Jesus tells us "I AM the Way, the Truth and the Life." We've heard these words before, believed them and been comforted by them, and yet I think Jesus wants to offer us more than a temporary fix, another cheese Frenchie to comfort us. He wants to offer us "life giving waters" (John 5), the "bread of life" (John 6:35) – something that will sustain our deepest spiritual longing. That's certainly his intention as he speaks to the disciples today.

I think that one of the reasons our lives seem chaotic is that we've come to believe, or we've been offered, a God who is too small. Can you remember, as a kid, laying on your back, staring up into the night sky, and feeling awestruck, as you wondered about the God who was more than all of that? This God was bigger than any concept you had to wrap around the Creator of the whole universe. At that moment "God" was more than just a proper name for some great big person way "out there". God was mystery, not a puzzle that could be solved, but something bigger than anything we could know, or know about "God". We came to this God from our heart, not our head.

As a child I remember having many questions because my sense of wonder opened up the universe. I trusted religion to guide me because of my parent's faith. That remains a gift until this day. But my education gave me answer to questions that meant little to me. I remember the disappointment I felt when I was given book answers. And I believe that questions remain and important spiritual guide.

In today's world the liveliest debates about "true" things go on in the political arena. At least that's where the talking seems to go on. But this debate doesn't allow for conversation. Its been reduced to a series of talking points repeated over and over again until they convince us by wearing us down.

In saying "I am the truth" Jesus is telling us that truth exists in a relationship, a give and take that allows our questions to expand our awareness. Comedians seem to be able to ask some of the most provoking questions today. A recent comedic commentator declared: "Jesus said, 'Love your enemies, do good to those who persecute you.' Does that mean that Christians who support war, torture and the death penalty should find another name for themselves? Shouldn't they at least stop waving their Bibles at us?"

Jesus answers these questions by inviting us to a meaning that comes from being associated with him because he is associated with the Father: "IF you know me, then you also know my Father... whoever has seen me has seen the Father... I AM in the Father and the Father IS in me." But even more astonishing, Jesus is telling us that his meaning, and the Father's meaning, comes from being associated with us. He is telling us that on the Way, whenever we step out and look for meaning, love or healing, that Jesus recognizes the distinctive sound of our footsteps, and its

## ARCHIVES SCRIPTURES

sound is joyful to his heart. Whenever we respond to a situation with integrity then the Truth of Jesus' life is also affirmed. Whenever we feel fully alive, in harmony with our best self and others, we are experiencing the resurrected Lord and giving him flesh and blood in our lives. And all of this is the Father's glory. Our lives become a way in the Father's reality which means heaven and earth are one.

I think our questions can lead us along this way but they must be dedicated to seeking truth. Jesus is the truth that is much larger than our "truths." To follow this way we need to retain our curiosity about what is going on in ourselves as well as around ourselves and avoid settling for the automatic answers that our personality feeds us. When in pursuit of truth we pay attention to ourselves to that we can be aware that many of the stock explanations that we pull out of our arsenal of answers are habits of thought that we developed when we were children. They become ways of avoiding the situation we're in at the moment and prevent us from experiencing its reality more deeply.

Fore example, a stock answer to a family fight may be "I am really angry at my father," but a fuller answer might be "I really love him and desperately want his love" Both reactions might be hard to accept, especially if they don't fit the way we want to think about ourselves. And yet they open us to more of our reality as well as to the possibility of a more real relationship. This is where Jesus, the True Way, guides us.

As we learn to be more fully present to our life and more sensitive to more of the reality in which we find our self we return to the wonder of our life. We become more fully open to the wholeness of life, the unconditional reality of divine Presence. We realize that the truth encompasses both our fearful reactions and the greater resources of the divine working within us. Our automatic reactions can still derail our search for "the truth" but acknowledging their presence, because we know that we are loved for all of who we are, and this brings us more in alignment with the true. Our openness to the wholeness of truth, whatever it is, allows us to bring our inner and divinely powered inner resources to expression in our lives. We participate in the relationship that is our way, our truth and our life.

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## INNER VIEWS

The Parable of *God's scandalous generosity*. (Mt. 20:1-17)

Or, how *God judges*.

What if you were a candidate for President of the United States and you used this Sunday's Gospel for your platform? Fox News would rip you apart as an "entitlement, tax spending liberal." MSNBC would cast you as a "wacko" and the Morning Show would interview you with a condescending grin. Clearly, from any of these points of view you would be out of touch with "the American people." Good Americans "earn their keep," "work for a living," and "pull their own weight." Exactly!

## ARCHIVES SCRIPTURES

I've met people who get angry at this Gospel (Mt. 20:1-17): "It just doesn't make sense." Exactly! The Father of Jesus does not make sense. He's far too generous for most people's taste. That's what parables are meant to do. They turn our world inside out. They dismantle our image of God so that we have to deal with God on God's terms. Our terms might be fair but they are far too stingy for God. It's absolutely necessary that we act responsibly in our lives, but this parable is about God, not about us. It's about the Source of our ability to respond – and that Source is unabashedly gracious and generous.

God's primary way of relating to us is generosity. God doesn't just promise us life after death, God offers us eternity now! God loves us abundantly without restrictions. The resistances we feel in response to this Gospel are inside us. They are not caused by the Gospel, they're our reaction, our resistance. Our pride, our egoic self wants to be worthy of God's love. It wants us to be in control of our life. Accepting the gift of God's graciousness just doesn't make sense to our ego.

As I mentioned last week, we can come to the Gospels from our ego or from our soul self. Our ego reads the Gospels literally as a demand to change ourselves for the better. That's why today's Gospel is so disturbing to our ego. This parable tells us that God's generosity doesn't depend on our hard work. God is generous because that is God's nature. Our ego tells us that "you'd better change your mind about God, whether you like it or not." Our soul self looks for the gift of generosity to be stirred up within us. This takes more time and usually a lot of patient alertness because a transformation of our attitude is what's happening. God is becoming the center of our life.

On the other hand God's generosity makes perfect sense to our soul self. And our soul self approaches our life gazing through metaphorical eyes. A metaphorical sense of reality recognizes that the way I see things is a projection colored by my intuition and once I recognize this I begin to see many layers of meaning to my reality. Again, this is what Jesus means by "judge not." He wants us to let go of our literal point of view so that we begin to intuitively recognize the gracious abundance of God's grace in every aspect of our lives. The gift is already generously provided within us – it is our soul itself metaphorically and allowing the gift of wisdom to rise to our conscious awareness.

When we begin to realize that life cannot be confined to our judgments and is filled with God's abundance our imagination and intuition is galvanized. We can't understand this intellectually or analyze it logically, but we can know it deeply at the level of soul. Our whole life, every bit of reality is filled with God's creative, gracious and lively presence. We can't control this but we can accept it and work with it. When we begin to take a metaphorical approach to our life, seeing our life as full of layers of meaning, we connect into the subconscious abundance of awareness that sees our life with greater wisdom. We connect to the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

The Gospels are full of characters who, just like many of us, feel out of place and are unsure that they belong. They feel isolated, left to their own devices. That's why our ego exists in the first place, its trying to claim our place in the universe. And Jesus is telling us that we don't need to claim it because in God's generosity we are claimed as Beloved children, we are given all that we most deeply need. When we stop judging and reducing ourselves to our thoughts we intuitively

## ARCHIVES SCRIPTURES

open our soul to God's abundant energy loving us into existence at every moment. This is where Jesus is trying to lead us with this parable.

Let me leave you with the insight of Rabbi Rami Shapiro;

Meditation is about melting the ice cube of ego into the ocean of reality.

Doing so decreases conflict and increases compassion.

If you are becoming more kind and helpful your meditation is working even if you never experience the purple haze of mystical distraction.

Spirituality

### Inner Views

This Sunday's Gospel is very disturbing, mostly because it still seems to be true. Jesus tells his followers

The scribes and Pharisees have taken their seat on the chair of Moses.

Therefore, do and observe all things whatsoever they tell you.

For they preach but do not practice. They tie up heavy burdens hard to carry and lay them on people's shoulders. And they will not lift a finger to move them.

(Mt. 23:1-17)

I don't want to criticize our current leadership in Rome. I know enough about my own life to know that its foolish to judge their motives. I would take it for granted that they are good men trying to do their best. But, on the other hand, they seem to be incredibly out of touch with what is happening amongst us who are trying to live our faith in the complexity of human life.

I talked to a woman who told me how proud she was of her children. They have grown up to be caring, respectful and responsible Americans. And they are very sensitive to issues of social justice. But they don't go to church because they feel the church doesn't live up to what it preaches. They expect results.

I've got a good friend who is terribly worried about her husband's health. She can't get him to go to a doctor, she is helpless and desperate. She grew up with parents who were "practicing Catholics." Unfortunately their understanding of their faith left little room for the way she experienced her life and no practical guidance to help her cope with her anxieties. Certainly she has made choices, usually without awareness, that have disassociated her from their faith, and now she can't find a path back. How can we turn that around: especially in the rigid and judgmental climate of today's religious culture? What wisdom is there in the judgmental, simplistic and smug advice disguised as "the Catholic answer?": In her mind there is only room for "the Catholic way" or "no way." How do I tell her that everything that she considers religion is just one point of view? I know from experience that our faith is much richer, much more nuanced and fundamentally compassionate. But that is not the image portrayed by our religious leaders and their policies. And how do I talk about this without becoming as judgmental and simplistic as those I criticize?

## ARCHIVES SCRIPTURES

My hope remains in the example, life and guidance of Jesus. Today's Gospel tells me that he was well aware of what was happening. He was not the least bit naive, nor does he expect us to be. He faced the reality honestly and found his way through it.

I see in Jesus a type of leadership that I have rarely experienced. It gives me hope and helps me trust Jesus to be a realistic and wise guide. Jesus does not try to master our lives. And because of his intimacy with our Father, he has revealed the foundation on which we can all build. We all share in his divine nature and the possibility of living with integrity.

His earliest followers found that they were better people when they were with him. They were more at peace with themselves and each other. They squabbled less and were more generous. And all of this they caught from being with him. They soaked up his presence and were inspired by his example. In the compassion of his eyes they found their own truth reflected. And in the silence of his prayer they found intimacy with the Father. Jesus welcomed them, not because he wanted to lead them, but because he had so much to share. And together they were becoming a community in which each one shone with a unique light, and found healing for their wounded selves.

In essence Jesus helps us develop a soul centered (built on the experience of our Father's presence) rather than an ego centered (built on ourself as separate individuals who must fend for our self) self. I believe that when our present leaders lose the sense of their soul and react with an anxious need to control the situation they are caught in their egos. And a sense of soul is not easy to come by today. Most people who live, at least partially from their soul, have found their way intuitively, without much help from our culture.

And I believe that it is our role as religious people to learn to live from our soul. Its hard to do in a culture that is so wrapped up in its ego and a religious culture that has forgotten its soul. I continue to turn to the life and teaching of Jesus for guidance. It takes time and prayer to see through the ego centric interpretation of his message that we've heard for so long. And it also takes a community, a relationships with people who are seeking a way of life that they know mostly through intuition. We need Jesus, we need prayer, and we need each other. And we need the courage of the Holy Spirit to look squarely into our lives with acceptance and total honesty. Let us pray for one another. We're trying to do our best.

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