

Sixth Sunday of Easter, B – May 5, 2024 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.  
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Alabama – 8:30am and 11:00am Sunday Masses – 975 words

We take for granted teachings like “God is love” – and that with the Lord Jesus we can have a true friendship. But if we were to step back and consider the themes of our readings against a wider historical backdrop, we should be rather shocked at what we hear from our Lord and his disciples this Sunday. For pagans before the time of Christ, and even for many since then, for example, the divine power was an object of terror, to be appeased. And that appeasement often took place through horrific sacrifices, including of other human beings, if not through other completely irrational rituals. And even for many within the community of the Jews, although the God worshipped was a personal and loving one, yet religion had taken on a rather cold legalism.

Against these historical currents, St. John teaches us that God is love itself – indeed, not just that we have to love him, but that he is the source of all love and his love enables us to love. And Jesus teaches us that we can have a true friendship with him, since he became one of us – since he came down to our level. Our love of him as his friend is what gains a hearing with him, not gruesome sacrifices. And finally, against that current of legalism present among some sectors of the Jews, Christ teaches us that “if you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love” – for, as we learn from the example he gave us, the commandments indicate how to love aright, and Christ kept all the commandments perfectly. Therefore, to keep them is to imitate him.

Recently, I’ve been returning to the theme of how Christ fulfills all the scriptures. A few weeks back, I explained how the Old Testament was a story in search of a conclusion; Christ is that conclusion, the last chapter, and since we live in him, it is still being written until the end of time. But if we consider what I just said about this week’s readings against the backdrop of historical religions, we can also advance the claim that Christ is the fulfillment of human history. In each one of those religions there were elements of truth; but each one also had its incompleteness, excesses, and errors. Jesus reveals true religion in all fullness, true worship of the true God. And that true religion and worship are found in the Catholic Church that he founded.

This truth claim, that surprisingly few religions make, is a serious one – not to be uttered casually or carelessly. For if we have true religion and true worship, then we had better believe rightly and worship devoutly. This, in fact, is a consequence of our love of God: we need to keep getting to know him better; our learning about him and what he has revealed must never end – especially, since we hope to spend eternity with him! And our solemn and earnest worship of a God so great that he comes down to our level to lift us to his, should therefore not be mundane or casual at all. Last night, I received a fine compliment from a Baptist man after a wedding I presided: he told me he was impressed by how reverent it was. But that is what true worship is!

Cornelius, in the first reading, had the sense of this, even if he missed the mark. He was a God-fearing Roman centurion who had also endeared himself to the Jewish people. An angel appeared to him and told him to invite Peter over to his house. Cornelius had surely heard about Peter and the healings and other marvels he had done in the name of Jesus Christ, so between the experience of the angel and knowing Peter’s reputation, when Peter arrived, Cornelius fell at his feet, as if to worship him. So Peter rightly said, “Get up. I myself am also a human being.” We don’t fall to our knees for each other, but we do before God. And our worship should not be self-referential either; we are not here to celebrate our community or ourselves, but to adore God.

It strikes me to note the idea that religion and right worship have often been described as a consolation. And I think we best experience the consolation of our religious worship when we make a rational offering of ourselves to God – but then, rather than gaze upon the offering (which is to say, rather than navel-gaze), we focus on him, on the Lord. The more we forget about ourselves, the more we focus on him, the more consoling it is. We have all experienced similar

consolation in friendship and other loving relationships. So much of our life is caught up in selfish cares (some of which are quite necessary and serious – not to downplay them). But it is nice to have a break from ourselves. And reverence is the gateway for taking that needed break.

Think about the gestures of reverence that we make during Mass: they are not like anything we do outside in the world. They are meant to help take us out of the world for a while, so to embrace God's time; indeed, to embrace God. They provide a framework for our rational offering of self to God, to laying our lives down – especially the past week and the week to come – before him. Yes, there are distractions; and for you parents, the distractions continue for multiple years. There are different seasons of life, as they say. But such reverence is pleasing to God and from within that framework he reaches out to console us – to give us, his friends, all that we need. Let us thank God for our true religion and our true worship – and beg him ever to keep us in the truth!