

“Wisdom of Infants” – Mat 11:16-19,25-30 – July 6, 2014

We – and the world at large – have this wondrous picture of a Jesus who has no emotions other than a kind of beatific and simple-minded loving smile. The scripture however show us a considerably different person, a Jesus with deep and passionate feelings, some of which are quite negative. For example, in our gospel reading from Matthew, can you hear the frustration and sarcasm in Jesus’ voice? “To what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, ‘We played the flute for you and you did not dance; we wailed and you did not mourn’”. Can you not just hear how he brings to mind the petulant whining of those ‘spoiled children’?

We even know the source of Jesus’ frustration because he goes on to describe in some detail just what the people of his generation were whining about. It seems that just as with any truly spoiled child nothing would satisfy the people of Jesus’ generation: John the Baptist came as a stern ascetic, refusing to touch wine and decent food and they called him demented; Jesus, the Son of Man, came both eating food and drinking wine and the people accused Him of being a glutton and a drunkard. No wonder Jesus was frustrated – it had to be like dealing with a whole generation of Goldilocks: “that one is too conservative!”, “this one is too liberal!” A bit like the secular world of today, an alternative middle ground of choosing *neither* John the Baptist nor Jesus seems to have been “just right!”

Presumably to avoid offending anyone’s sensibilities, we skipped over a short section in our reading that provides in great depth and detail a more complete understanding of why Jesus was so frustrated. “Then He began to reproach the cities in which most of His deeds of power had been done, because they did not repent.” I think we can easily imagine Jesus shaking His head and wondering, “What more could they possibly have wanted to see?” Hearing that John the Baptist is in prison, Jesus has been elaborating on the significance of John and his ministry. Jesus saw John as the end of a line of prophets looking forward to the reign of God that has arrived – for Jesus, John is the Elijah who was to come announcing the Messiah, but now John is in prison and Jesus is likewise being ignored by the people.

We would expect at this point of frustration, after the people had turned away from John the Baptist and after they had ignored the demonstrations of the power of God at work in Jesus, that we would hear strong condemnations. After all, that would be the reasonable, rational, normal reaction of anyone, wouldn’t it? “Ignore me, eh? Well, I’ll show you!” is pretty much a universal reaction. And if we were to read the section we skipped, we would hear a bit of that – perhaps that’s why the lectionary skips it – not many people are happy to hear Jesus venting His frustration, preferring instead to hear the softer, gentler, more familiar invitation that follows.

But we should honestly hear that frustration in Jesus. We need to hear the wrenching depth of His emotion that the very people to whom He came to offer life itself shrugged their shoulders and said, “whatever!” We need to hear that frustration, we need to absorb it until we feel that there is no other course of action but to zap them with a cosmic thunderbolt, raining down sulfur and brimstone upon their uncaring, uninvolved heads.

Why? Why do we need to hear and absorb and be consumed by that frustration? Because only when we do, only when we come to believe that there is only one reasonable, rational, sensible course of action to deal with the ingrates that ignored the Son of Man, only then can we truly begin to understand the different kind of wisdom personified in Jesus, the wisdom of God, a wisdom of grace that makes no sense, a wisdom that is not rational, a wisdom that cannot be explained. Only then can we begin to truly understand the magnificence of God’s grace in Christ, expressed in His merciful mercy towards and forgiving of those very ingrates who ignored what He had to offer.

God’s grace makes no sense, does it? By all that we consider rational and sane, we would expect that in order to earn God’s forgiveness for our sins we would have to clothe ourselves, like John

the Baptist, in sackcloth and ashes, that we would have to grovel in humility before God, that we would have to flagellate ourselves with self-doubt, self-pity, self-loathing until we were so obviously sorry for what we had done that even God would have to forgive us. After all, if we follow conventional wisdom we would have to agree that the only path to God would lie through a valley of self-denial, of purity in thought and deed, that only the precious few who managed to tread carefully through the mine-field of life would arrive safely and unscarred at Heaven's gate, acceptable only because of their hard work and devotion to purity.

That's what conventional wisdom would say today and even more so in Jesus' day. In both Greek and Hebrew cultures people personified Wisdom. The Greeks with their pantheon of gods and goddesses had room for the Goddess of Wisdom whose name was Sophia, the very word used for wisdom. The Hebrew people tread a little softer on the 'goddess' part, but we still do hear in the Old Testament references to Wisdom personified, for example in Proverbs 8:22-36. Today, especially in this age that follows the Age of Enlightenment, the age of rationality in which we tend to worship at the altar of scientific thought, everything must be rational, reasonable, explainable. For many people even faith needs to be rational, has to be expressed in some kind of algorithmic formula with which we can calculate how many bonus points we can earn for being well-dressed, having a nice smile, carrying a floppy bible.

"Thank God", or as Jesus said, "I thank you [praise you], Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants." Thank God that neither conventional wisdom, nor even a goddess of Wisdom, rules. Thank God that all wisdom has been incarnated in Christ Jesus, the Logos, the Word. Thank God, because the path of reconciliation is not the tortured algorithm of logic and calculus, an equation that we could never fulfill, but thank God that we are reconciled with God in Christ through the totally irrational gift of grace. Thank God that from Him, through Christ, a different wisdom holds true: a wisdom clear to infants, a wisdom of reconciliation and life offered for the accepting.

"How can this be?" the wisdom-driven skeptics ask, "because it makes no sense." True, it makes no sense, unless you believe Jesus' statements that, "All things have been handed over to me by my Father ..." "No one knows the Father except the Son; no one knows the Son except the Father" – this is a different kind of wisdom, this is not the wisdom of calculation and reasonableness, this is the wisdom of the Word made flesh; this is the wisdom of a world saved through an ugly death on a cross and the unreasonable resurrection from death that followed, this is the different wisdom of mercy and grace made real by God who gave His only Son that we might have life.

And so with the understanding that this is a different wisdom, we come to and are able to understand the all-familiar saying from Jesus, "come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest." But even more so, only with seeing clearly the upside-down, inside-out, makes-no-sense different wisdom of God's grace can we begin to comprehend Jesus' explanation of that rest, that being yoked with Him actually lightens the burden of life. Only with that different wisdom that comprehends the mercy and grace of God at work in Christ can we begin to truly realize that our options are not either to have or not-have a yoke ... the yoke of life's burdens is always there ... but that instead in our faith we have the options of either dragging the burdens ourselves or having Christ take up the load. How much wisdom does it take to solve that puzzle?! I think even Homer Simpson would be inspired to say, "doh!"

So, are we smart enough to have the wisdom of infants? Are we able to see that the love we are called to share also needs to be founded in nonsensical grace instead of earned forgiveness? I'm not saying it's easy because it's not; it is difficult to set aside all the "eye for an eye" that we have been taught over the years as we have 'grown' out of infancy; it is difficult to not give in to those feelings of

“I’ll get you” that rise so easily. It’s not easy, unless you are willing to exercise the wisdom of an infant and accept the uplifting and guiding love and support offered by God through the Holy Spirit promised by Jesus.

Once again, echoing Jesus, let us declare “thank God!” Thank God that we are not saved and reconciled with him through some impossible calculus of obedience, but that having been saved by Christ’s redeeming action, we are now free to work with Him, finding rest in His sharing the load. May God be ever praised for granting us this different wisdom, this insight into life eternal and abundant.