

Welcome Home

I doubt there are two words in the English language that offer more comfort to more people, no matter your age, no matter your circumstance, than these: "welcome home."

In the beginning, when we declared our independence from God, and set out, like the Prodigal Son, we were so sure we could do it all without God.

Our fathers and mothers in faith ended up as slaves in Egypt, much like the prodigal son, who finds himself slopping pigs in a far country.

God hears their cry for help, and, after a long journey to encourage a change of heart, brings them home to a land they can call their own.

But they, like us, continue to find good reasons why they, like us, should trust our own best thinking, and they, like us, often become lost again, homeless again.

The last century is perhaps the greatest testament to humanity's inability to go it alone, to trust in ourselves, to rely on our own best thinking.

The 20th century was by far the bloodiest, most savage century in all of recorded history.

Millions slain.

Nuclear weapons used on civilian populations.

Gulags and ethnic cleansings, and the holocaust.

Wars of revolution.

Wars of colonial power.

Wars of choice.

It is a shining example of what, left to our own devices, we are capable of becoming and it's not a pretty picture.

No wonder it's said: "With God, we can do anything; without God, we will stop at nothing."

Yet, through it all, God extends his hand to us, and ever so gently beckons, "come home."

How do we get there?

The gospel today tells us.

It tells us in words that, on the surface seem so simple, but the surface is only the beginning, the entryway, the door; it is not the entire journey.

"Love me", says Jesus.

And that is the doorway to getting home.

"Love me" isn't about warm puppy dog feelings for Jesus.

"Love me", as the doorway home. is about doing what Jesus does.

Like washing the feet of his friends, even the one who is ready to betray him.

Like welcoming the stranger, the alien, the widow, the orphan.

Like putting people before rules, kindness before duty.

"Love me" is not so much an emotion as it is a way of life.

Paul puts flesh on these bones when we hear of his adventures today in Acts.

Paul has a vision.

He plans to travel deeper into Asia, but those plans are nixed by the Risen Lord, who takes on the role of the world's first travel agent.

And in that role, Our Lord sends Paul a vision of a man calling from Macedonia in Europe.

Macedonia back then, as you all know, is a part of what is now Greece.

Paul immediately changes his plans, gets with the new assignment, and embarks on a journey that would make old Jonah proud.

Paul's trip is like taking a small boat from Oahu to Maui (about 60 miles) in rough seas, then from Maui to the Big Island, again in a small boat (about 100 miles), then walking from Hilo to the top of Volcano; all of which he does with "great haste."

When Paul talks about running the good race for Christ, he often means it quite literally!

When he reaches the end of what has to be an exhausting trip, he goes looking for a Jewish synagogue and for the 10 men needed to make a quorum for the Sabbath prayer to begin.

But there is no synagogue, nor are there 10 Jewish men.

Instead there is a riverbank and a few women.

You might expect Paul to be mad; or at least chagrined that all that travel, all that haste, brings him not to a synagogue, not to any men, but to the side of a river, and a few women; gentile women at that, pagan women.

But Paul is neither upset nor chagrined.

Paul is fine because Paul understands that to love Jesus is to do what Jesus does.

And Jesus spares no effort for us; Jesus goes to every length for us and with us, and then even farther: and Jesus is chock full of surprises for those who take their chances with him.

So what does Paul do given the circumstances?

Let him tell you: "We sat down and spoke with the women."

What a way to live!

Just taking things as they come.

Trusting, as Blessed Julian says, that all will be well, and all will be well, and all manner of things will be well!

Little does Paul know that on that riverbank sits the beginnings of the most faithful community the young church will ever know, the church at Philippi.

The Philippian church will soon support Paul's mission with money, prayers and with deep friendship.

No wonder Paul later writes to them:

"My dear, dear friends, I love you so much! I do want the very best for you. You make me feel such joy, you fill me with such pride." Phil. 4:1 (The Message).

One of the women at the riverbank this morning is Lydia.

Funny how so many Christian denominations exclude women from the ministry when in the early church, there are women all over the place in positions of leadership!

Our Fran Kramer got her letter to the editor published last week about the sad state of affairs in her former church when it comes to women ministers, and she promptly received a response from a writer who told her that the job of a woman is to sit down and do what she's told by the men of the church.

I'm not so sure St. Paul or Jesus, agree.

But here we are with Lydia, a woman selling purple cloth, the cloth of the well to do, of royalty.

She probably rubs shoulders with the rich and famous.

But Lydia is also this:

A woman whose heart and mind are open to a radically new way to encounter life, to encounter God.

And because of this openness, she is the first European to become a Christian.

She is, quite literally, the mother in faith of every European who ever became a Christian.

Her legacy has its start this morning, on that riverbank.

She says to Paul what Jesus says to us today: "Come, and stay at my home."

"Welcome home."

Last week we got an email from our Bishop that discusses in some pretty gruesome detail what it means to be a church that welcomes folks home: and what it means to be a church that won't.

The article the Bishop attached is entitled "The Autopsy of a Dying Church."

The gist of the article is this: churches that welcome all kinds of folks in; churches that look like the neighborhood they live in; churches that reach out and serve the needs of their neighbors; these are the churches that thrive.

And the churches that stay closed in on themselves; that are locked tight from Monday through Saturday, that are afraid to venture out: these are the churches sitting on death row.

It's just a matter of time until they're dead.

And I must say even I was surprised to see that the Bishop singled out only two churches in the entire diocese as being the reaching out kind: St. James on the Big Island, and us!

All of which brings us, I think, to the gift that Jesus gives to those who do what Jesus does: it is his peace.

The peace of Jesus isn't the absence of conflict.

In fact, if you choose to follow Jesus, you may find more conflict in your life than ever before.

It doesn't mean that the nitty gritty of paying the bills and earning money for rent goes away; nor does it solve all problems with our spouses, our children or our friends.

As the Buddha remarked, "Before enlightenment, I chopped wood and carried water; after enlightenment, I chopped wood and carried water."

But what the peace of Christ does give is a way through all our fears, all of our needs, all of our anxieties.

It is a peace that assures you and you and me that no matter the trauma or anxiety or fear standing in front of us, we are always and forever held by the sure hand of the One who creates all things, the one who sustains all things, and the one who raises to life even the dead.

As usual, it is a poet who says it best when we come face to face with the Reality that is the living God.

God is not rescuer.
God is not safety.
God is not benevolent or critical Father-knows-best.
God is not puppet or puppeteer.
God is not who I thought/was taught he is.
God is love —
reckless, spendthrift, indiscriminate, passionate.
God is pursuer —
relentless, determined, tireless seeker of my soul.
God is challenger —
demanding movement, journey, change,
growth.

God is creator —
delighted in me, her creation.
God is nurturer —
feeding her hungry children at the breast.
God is teacher —
eager to share her knowledge and wisdom.
God is dancer and music maker —
creation responds joyfully to her choreography.
God is spirit, wind, and fire —
uncontainable,
she will not tolerate the tidy boxes
we painstakingly construct for

her.

God is light —
exposing, revealing,
searching out all that I would hide.

God is unknowable
yet constantly revealing herself to me
with a richness and intensity I cannot ignore.

God knows me,
penetrates and forms me,
recognizes and claims me as she has from my
mother's womb.

-The Reverend Virginia Going

The door through which the love of Jesus beckons is a door leading to an adventurous life!

A life of risk to be sure; a life of suffering perhaps; and most definitely a life that calls us off of our couches, out of our comfort zones, and into the great unknown that we call God.

So this day, may the God who calls us home, often through trying journeys and heartbreaking travels, welcome you home.

And as God welcomes you home, may you too whisper into the waiting ear of the stranger, the alien, and the widow the words they too long to hear:
"Welcome home."

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