

29TH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR: 2014

THE CHALLENGE OF DIALOG: POPE FRANCIS AND THE SYNOD

TODAY'S GOSPEL PRESENTS US WITH A SUBTLE BUT IMPORTANT CHALLENGE.

JESUS IS CONFRONTED BY HIS OPPONENTS WITH A TRICK QUESTION ABOUT THE PAYMENT OF ROMAN TAXES, WHICH IS DESIGNED TO MAKE HIM LOOK LIKE EITHER A COLLABORATOR OR A REVOLUTIONARY, DEPENDING ON HOW HE ANSWERS. HE AVOIDS THE TRAP WITH HIS OWN CLEVER DODGE TO GIVE TO CAESAR WHAT IS HIS AND TO GOD WHAT IS GOD'S.

THIS INCIDENT IS ONE OF A SERIES IN WHICH JESUS IS CONFRONTED BY HIS OPPONENTS IN AN EFFORT TO TRAP HIM OR DRAG HIM INTO THE STRUGGLE BETWEEN THE POLITICAL/RELIGIOUS PARTIES OF HIS DAY(THE SADDUCEES MIGHT BE SEEN AS THE CONSERVATIVES OF THE TIME AND THE PHARASEES AS THE LIBERALS). WHILE EACH OF THESE STORIES ARE SUBJECT TO DIFFERENT LEVELS OF INTERPRETATION AND APPLICATION ON DIFFERENT RELIGIOUS ISSUES, THERE IS A COMMON DYNAMIC PRESENT IN ALL OF THEM THAT IS THE POINT OF REFLECTION I WOULD LIKE TO FOCUS ON TODAY. THAT IS, THE PRETENSE TO DIALOG THAT MOTIVATES THOSE WHO ARE TRYING TO TRAP JESUS. THEY OFFER AN INVITATION TO DIALOG BUT DON'T REALLY WANT ONE, AS THEY HAVE THEIR ESTABLISHED POSITIONS.

REAL DIALOG IS A DANGEROUS THING. IT MEANS TRULY OPENING OURSELVES TO THE OTHER AND WHY THEY THINK AND FEEL AS THEY DO. IT MEANS BEING OPEN TO THE IMPACT OF OUR WORDS AND ACTIONS ON OTHERS, AND THEREFORE BEING OPEN TO THE POSSIBILITY OR NECESSITY OF CHANGE IN OURSELVES AND HOW WE SAY AND DO THINGS. REAL DIALOG REQUIRES OPENNESS TO CHANGE ON SOME LEVEL. YOU CANNOT SAY YOU WANT DIALOG AND BE TOTALLY CLOSED TO ANY CHANGE IN YOUR POSITION OR HOW YOU ARTICULATE IT OR ACT ON IT.

WE MUST ALSO BE CLEAR HERE THAT THE CONFLICT BETWEEN JESUS AND HIS OPPONENTS PRESENTED IN THE GOSPELS IS NOT A CONFLICT BETWEEN CHRISTIANS AND JEWS OR A COMPARISON OF CHRISTIANITY AND JUDAISM. THE CONFLICT BETWEEN JESUS AND HIS OPPONENTS IS A CONFLICT BETWEEN JEWS OVER WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THE BIBLICAL FAITH OF ISRAEL AND WHAT IS THE CORE EXPERIENCE OF GOD TO WHICH THE BIBLICAL FAITH OF ISRAEL IS MEANT TO LEAD PEOPLE.

IN THIS CONFLICT I BELIEVE JESUS IS ACTING IN THE TRADITION OF THE HEBREW PROPHETS, INSISTING THAT THE FAITH OF ISRAEL HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH POLITICAL POWER, IDEOLOGIES OF CONTROL OR PROTECTING THE INSTITUTIONAL INTERESTS OF THE RELIGIOUS ESTABLISHMENT.

RATHER, IT HAS TO DO WITH A RADICAL OPENNESS TO GOD'S PRESENCE AMONG US, CALLING US BEYOND WHERE WE ARE INTO AN EXPERIENCE OF GOD'S COMPASSIONATE LOVE FOR US AND THE NECESSITY OF OUR COMPASSIONATE EMBRACE IN THAT LOVE OF ALL OTHERS. WHAT JESUS RADICALLY OPPOSED WAS THE REDUCTION OF RELIGION TO AN IDEOLOGY FOCUSED ON KEEPING POWER AND INFLUENCE FOR THE RELIGIOUS ESTABLISHMENT RATHER THAN BEING GOD'S INSTRUMENT FOR BRINGING THE TRANSFORMATION OF FAITH AND COMPASSION TO HUMAN SOCIETY.

THESE GOSPEL STORIES WERE PRESERVED IN THE CHRISTIAN SCRIPTURES NOT AS A RECORD OF JESUS' CONFLICTS WITH OTHER JEWISH TEACHERS, BUT AS A WARNING AND CHALLENGE TO THE CHURCH.

THEY ARE A WARNING ABOUT HOW WE CAN CLING TO OUR PREJUDICES AND PRECONCEPTIONS OF HOW THE WORLD AND OTHER PEOPLE ARE, AND ONLY PRETEND TO BE OPEN TO REAL DIALOG WITH OTHERS, WHILE WE ARE IN FACT CLOSED TO THEM OR THE WORLD BEING ANYTHING OTHER THAN WHAT WE HAVE ALREADY DECIDED THEY CAN BE. IT IS A WARNING THAT HEALING AND LIFE GIVING TRANSFORMATIONS CANNOT OCCUR IN THOSE WHO HAVE ALREADY DETERMINED ALL THE POSSIBILITIES IN THEIR OWN MINDS. SUCH PRETENSE TO OPENNESS VERSUS REAL OPENNESS IS THE MAJOR OBSTACLE TO OUR GROWTH AND HEALING AS HUMAN BEINGS.

THIS WARNING AND CHALLENGE IS, I BELIEVE, DRAWN INTO SHARP AND PRACTICAL FOCUS FOR US AS A CHURCH BY THE SYNOD ON THE FAMILY THAT HAS BEEN GATHERED BY POPE FRANCIS, AND WHICH IS NOW COMPLETING ITS FIRST SESSION. THIS SYNOD WAS CALLED BY POPE FRANCIS TO LOOK HONESTLY AT HOW THE CHURCH'S TEACHINGS AND THE WAY WE IMPLEMENT THEM ACTUALLY IMPACT PEOPLES' LIVES. AS YOU KNOW FROM THE MEDIA, THIS SYNOD HAS BECOME THE FOCAL POINT OF CONTROVERSY BECAUSE OF ISSUES RAISED ABOUT THE STATUS OF GAY PEOPLE IN THE CHURCH COMMUNITY AND THE ISSUE OF HOW WE TREAT PEOPLE WHO ARE DIVORCED AND REMARRIED. THIS CONTROVERSY ALSO REVEALS HOW QUICKLY THE BATTLE LINES BETWEEN CONSERVATIVE AND LIBERAL FACTIONS ARE DRAWN. IT ALSO RAISES THE QUESTION OF WHETHER OR NOT WE AS A CHURCH WILL ALLOW INTERNAL IDEOLOGICAL CONFLICTS TO KEEP US FROM THE GENUINE DIALOG TO WHICH THE RISEN LORD INVITES US, AND IN WHICH ALONE WE CAN DISCERN HOW GOD IS ACTING IN OUR DAY TO LEAD US TO HONESTLY ENCOUNTER THE HUMANITY AND HUMAN NEEDS OF ALL IN OUR COMMUNITY AND WORLD, AND HOW OUR WORDS AND ACTIONS AS A CHURCH IMPACT THEM.

IT SEEMS TO ME THAT IN CHALLENGING THE CHURCH TO ENTER INTO THIS DIALOG, POPE FRANCIS IS ALSO TEACHING US WHAT IS NECESSARY TO DO THIS. FRANCIS SAID: "TRADITION AND MEMORY OF THE PAST MUST HELP US TO HAVE THE COURAGE TO OPEN NEW AREAS TO GOD. THOSE WHO TODAY ALWAYS LOOK FOR DISCIPLINARIAN SOLUTIONS, THOSE WHO LONG FOR AND EXAGGERATED DOCTRINAL "SECURITY", THOSE WHO STUBBORNLY TRY TO RECOVER A PAST THAT NO LONGER EXISTS— THEY HAVE A STATIC, AND INWARD DIRECTED VIEW OF THINGS. IN THIS WAY FAITH BECOMES AN IDEOLOGY AMONG OTHER IDEOLOGIES."

WE ARE PAINFULLY AWARE OF THE CONSEQUENCES OF RELIGION BEING TURNED INTO A POLITICAL IDEOLOGY AS PART OF THE HUMAN CONFLICT FOR POWER AND CONTROL. IT IS SOMETHING EASY TO SEE IN OTHER PEOPLES' RELIGION IN THE JUSTIFICATIONS FOR TERRORISM AND VIOLENCE, ETC..YET THE REAL CHALLENGE IS TO RECOGNIZE THIS DYNAMIC IN OUR OWN RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY AND INSTITUTIONS:

-WITHIN THE CHURCH WE HAVE WITNESSED HOW CONSERVATIVE AND LIBERAL FACTIONS CAN SAVAGE EACH OTHER WITH A VICIOUSNESS THAT SHOWS NONE OF THE COMPASSION OF JESUS, BECAUSE THEY ARE CONVINCED THAT THEY HAVE THE REAL TRUTH OF THEIR RELIGION.

-I HAVE SEEN HOW CHURCH AUTHORITY CAN HANDLE ISSUES OF CHALLENGE OR DISSENT WITHOUT ANY SENSE OF FAIRNESS OR DUE PROCESS BECAUSE THEY EITHER KNOW ONLY DISCIPLINARIAN SOLUTIONS, OR THEIR SENSE OF PROTECTING THEIR INSTITUTIONAL INTERESTS DISPENSES WITH THE MORAL OBLIGATION OF FAIRNESS OR DUE PROCESS.

-IN OUR CHURCH COMMUNITIES WE HAVE SEEN HOW THOSE WHO DIFFERED WITH THE CHURCH'S POSITION ON VARIOUS MORAL ISSUES OR WHO HAVE BEEN DIVORCED AND REMARRIED HAVE FOUND THEMSELVES TREATED AS IF THEY WERE PUBLIC OUTCASTS WITH NO PLACE IN THE CHURCH.

IN THE FACE OF THIS REALITY FRANCIS SAID: "IF ONE HAS ALL THE ANSWERS TO ALL THE QUESTIONS, THIS IS PROOF THAT GOD IS NOT WITH HIM." INSTEAD FRANCIS SEEMS TO BE CALLING US TO WHAT SHOULD BE THE TRUE FOCUS OF OUR RELIGIOUS FAITH AND PRACTICE, AND WHAT SHOULD BE THE FRAMEWORK FOR THE DELIBERATIONS OF THE SYNOD: "WE MUST ALWAYS CONSIDER THE HUMAN PERSON. HERE WE ENTER INTO THE MYSTERY OF THE HUMAN BEING. IN LIFE GOD ACCOMPANIES PERSONS, AND WE MUST ACCOMPANY THEM STARTING FROM THEIR SITUATION. IT IS ALWAYS NECESSARY TO ACCOMPANY THEM WITH MERCY."

THAT IS, THE FIRST CONCERN WE MUST HAVE AS A CHURCH MUST BE TO TOUCH THE HEARTS OF PEOPLE TO PROCLAIM GOD'S MERCIFUL LOVE TO THEM AND TO UPHOLD THEIR SENSE OF PERSONAL SELF-WORTH. THIS IS THE NECESSARY BASIS FOR ANY DIALOG. IF WE, AS A CHURCH, DO NOT COMMUNICATE OUR ACCEPTANCE AND COMPASSIONATE LOVE FOR PEOPLE, WHY SHOULD ANY OF THEM CARE WHAT WE HAVE TO SAY?

IN THIS REGARD FRANCIS SAID:"THE CHURCH SOMETIMES HAS LOCKED ITSELF UP IN SMALL THINGS, SMALL MINDED RULES. THE MOST IMPORTANT THING IS THE FIRST PROCLAMATION: JESUS CHRIST HAS SAVED YOU AND THE MINISTERS OF THE CHURCH MUST BE MINISTERS OF MERCY ABOVE ALL ELSE."

THIS IS ALSO WHY FRANCIS SAID:" THE CHURCH CAN NO LONGER INSIST ONLY ON ISSUES RELATED TO ABORTION, GAY MARRIAGES AND THE USE OF CONTRACEPTIVE METHODS.WE CANNOT BE OBSESSED WITH THE TRANSMISSION OF A DISJOINTED MULTITUDE OF DOCTRINES...WE MUST FIND A NEW BALANCE, OTHERWISE THE MORAL EDIFICE OF THE CHURCH WILL LIKELY CRUMBLE LIKE AS HOUSE OF CARDS."

HIS WORDS SERVE TO CHALLENGE US TO SEE THAT TO FOCUS TOTALLY ON CERTAIN ISSUES AS WE HAVE BLINDS US TO THE TOTALITY OF THE CHURCH'S MORAL TEACHING, AND REDUCES THESE ISSUES TO BEING A LITMUS TEST OF LOYALTY TO THE INSTITUTION AND INTSTITUTIONAL POLICY THAT REFLECTS THE REDUCTION OF RELIGION TO AN IDEOLOGY OF CONTROL. CONSEQUENTLY WE HAVE WITNESSED THE GROWING REALITY OF DIFFERENT CLASSES OF PEOPLE WITHIN THE CHURCH WHO FEEL THEY NO LONGER HAVE A PLACE IN THE CHURCH BECAUSE THEY ARE DIVORCED AND REMARRIED, GAY, OR CANNOT ACCEPT A MORAL POSITION OF THE CHURCH ON CONTRACEPTION, ETC..

IN THE FACE OF THIS REALITY WHICH HAS COME TO DOMINATE THE INNER EXPERIENCE AND OUTWARD POSTURE OF OUR CHURCH, FRANCIS SAID: "THE CHURCH MUST BE A HOME OF ALL, NOT A SMALL CHAPEL THAT CAN HOLD ONLY A SMALL GROUP OF PEOPLE." WORDS THAT PROCLAIM THAT THE CHURCH, AND ESPECIALLY ITS SHEPHERDS, MUST BE HUMBLE IN BRINGING GOD'S MERCY TO THE MODERN WORLD, TO LIBERATE PEOPLE FROM THE ARROGANCE , AUTHORITARIANISM, AND HUBRIS OF BOTH THE CHURCH AND STATE THAT HAS MADE PEOPLE LOSE A SENSE OF THEIR WORTH AND GOD'S HEALING MERCY AND LOVE. THOSE WHO WOULD ARGUE THAT AN OPEN AND HONEST DIALOG AND RE-EXAMINATION OF THE ISSUES CONFRONTING THE SYNOD REGARDING THE CHURCH'S ATTITUDES TOWARD GAY PEOPLE AND DIVORCED AND REMARRIED CATHOLICS IS UNDERMINING OF THE CHURCH'S AUTHORITY AND THE INTEGRITY OF THE FAMILY, WOULD SEEM TO ME TO BE VIEWING THE CHURCH AS A BELEAGUERED AND THREATENED BURAUCRACY RATHER THAN AS THE BODY OF CHRIST , WHICH HAS NOTHING TO FEAR FROM ALWAYS DISCERNING HOW IT CAN BEST FIND A WAY TO INCORPORATE AND NURTURE ALL WHO LOOK TO IT IN NEED.

TO ACCEPT THE CHALLENGE OF REAL DIALOG WHICH POPE FRANCIS HAS PUT BEFORE THE SYNOD AND OURSELVES, IT IS NECESSARY THAT WE LISTEN TO THE JESUS PRESENTED TO US IN THE GOSPELS. THE JESUS WHO ALWAYS REBUKED THE MENTALITY OF THOSE, WHO IN THE NAME OF RELIGION:

- CLOSED THEMSELVES OFF FROM ANY REAL DIALOG OR ENCOUNTER IN THE SEARCH FOR TRUTH.
- WHO FOR THE SAKE OF CERTITUDE AND SELF-ASSURANCE IMPRISON THEMSELVES IN VERY NARROW DEFINITIONS OF THE HUMAN PERSON AND HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS.
- WHO OUT OF FEAR USE MORALITY AND RELIGION TO JUSTIFY UNFAIR OR EVEN VIOLENT TREATMENT OF THOSE WHO DO NOT SHARE THEIR BELIEFS.

INDEED WE VERY MUCH NEED THE LIBERATING ENCOUNTER WITH THE JESUS WHO WAS ALWAYS IN OPPOSITION TO THE RELIGIOUS IDEOLOGIES AND FUNDAMENTALISMS OF HIS DAY.

FOR HE WAS ALWAYS EXPOSING THE IDOLATRY OF THEIR ATTEMPTS TO PUT GOD IN A BOTTLE AND EXPOSING THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN BELIEVING IN AIR-TIGHT THEOLOGICAL DEFINITIONS AND BELIEVING IN THE LIVING GOD WHO IS BEYOND ALL OUR DEFINITIONS.

IN THE SEMINARY I HAD A WISE PROFESSOR WHO ALWAYS ADMONISHED US: "REMEMBER GENTLEMEN, THE CHURCH IS GOD'S HERALD, NOT HIS JAILOR. THE CHURCH IS THE HERALD OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD, THE CHURCH IS NOT THE KINGDOM OF GOD!"

WE NEED THE TRANSFORMING ENCOUNTER WITH THIS JESUS:

- WHO IN THE FACE OF THE SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS OF THE REPRESENTATIVES OF RELIGION REBUKED THEIR PRETENSE TO HAVE ANY SPECIAL HOLD ON GOD'S LOVE AND MERCY,
- WHO IN THE FACE OF THE BIGOTRY AND RELIGIOUSLY ENDORSED NATIONALISM AND PREJUDICES OF HIS DAY, PROCLAIMED THE WORTHINESS OF THE FOREIGNER, THE PAGAN AND THE SOCIAL OUTCAST.
- WHO IN REACTION TO THOSE WHO TRIED TO USE THE SCRIPTURES AS A WEAPON AGAINST HIM, TAUGHT THAT THE SCRIPTURES ARE ALIVE TO US ONLY IF WE ALLOW THEM TO SPEAK UNFETTERED BY OUR PREJUDICES AND PREDETERMINED IDEAS OF WHAT THEY MUST PROVE OR HAVE TO SAY TO US.

THIS IS THE JESUS WHO ALWAYS STANDS BEFORE US AS THE ONE WHO PROCLAIMS THE EVER GREATNESS OF GOD IN THE FACE OF ALL HUMAN ATTEMPTS TO CONTAIN GOD. WHO STANDS AS THE ONE WHO PROCLAIMS THE UTTER FALSEHOOD OF ALL HUMAN BELIEFS THAT DO NOT LEAD US TO A DEEPER AND HUMBLER UNDERSTANDING OF GOD'S COMPASSIONATE LOVE FOR ALL PEOPLE.

WE CANNOT ENCOUNTER THIS JESUS WITHOUT BEING CHALLENGED TO SEE OUR CHURCH AND OUR WORLD THROUGH HIS EYES. WE ARE CHALLENGED TO JUDGE OURSELVES AND OUR CHURCH BY THE STANDARD OF THE ONE WHO TAUGHT THAT THE ULTIMATE TEST OF OUR FAITH IS WHETHER WE ARE BEING LED TO A MORE HUMBLE SUBMISSION TO GOD AND A MORE COMPASSIONATE EMBACE OF ONE ANOTHER.

THUS LET US PRAY FOR POPE FRANCIS AND FOR THE SYNOD AND FOR OURSELVES AS A CHURCH COMMUNITY THAT WE MAY BE FREE BY GOD'S GRACE TO RESPOND TO GOD'S CALL TO LEAD US BEYOND WHERE WE ARE TO DO WHAT FRANCIS HAS SAID: "WE MUST FIND A NEW BALANCE OR ELSE EVEN THE MORAL EDIFICE OF THE CHURCH WILL COLLAPSE LIKE A HOUSE OF CARDS."

AS JESUS OFTEN SAID TO HIS LISTENERS: "LET THOSE WHO HAVE EARS HEAR, LET THOSE WHO HAVE EYES SEE!"

