Homily July 16, 2023

The Epistle today is a letter of Paul to the Romans; in it he contrasts the spirit and the flesh. Paul tells those who have newly become Christians that they possess the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Christ, and because they do, they should/can no longer orient their lives around fleshly, material interests. Even though those interests are necessary, they should not be central. Spiritual interests must take precedence. This is an epistle to the Romans, to gentiles, but I’d like to explore what its message is to the Jews, people in Paul’s own community, who might be hearing it.

The main obligation for Jews was to do God’s will, to do the Good. God is Goodness; thus he demands that you do the Law which guides one toward right action. Judaism is not so much a religion of belief, of believing the truth (an intellectual act,) as it is doing the truth (an ethical act.) So, for Jews, what is needed is to know what is right to do, (and that’s been revealed in the Law) and then do it. The Law opposes materialism, greed, disrespect, cruelty. The Law informs the Jews., and the prophets remind them. Relationship to God, a sense of personal dialogue, was not the goal. You were not meant to be buddies with God; you were to do his will. The orientation to God was played out in doing his will; it was not a sense of God within, whose presence in one helps direct one to compassionate and ethical decisions. God is not an intimate.

Now Paul’s message to Jew and Gentile alike, is that the Spirit of God, which Jews were familiar with, is out there for the taking, it’s accessible, it’s been offered as a new app through which you can know God, but more than that, “see” God, be in touch with Him; actually Paul urges one to internalize God. This is a new approach for the Jews of the time. They knew of God, they knew God, they prayed to God, they worshipped God, they adored God, they revered God—but had they been invited to experience God, to take in God’s spirit to themselves, to actually in some sense “see” God? Not really. This added experience is what Paul says Christ is offering, and not only offering, this is what Christ is, it is Christ’s role to be the face of God. Jews were not used to thinking of God in terms of an inner presence. Evangelicals often talk about and maybe ask you if you have a personal relationship with God, and most Episcopalians would shy away and try to change the subject. The question has become trite and full of fundamentalist assumptions. But in a deep sense it is Paul’s question to Jews and Gentiles –have you internalized God? And in so doing have your actions reflected God’s presence within you?

Paul says that we live in a fleshly material world, but you should be imbued with the Spirit of God, incorporate the Spirit of God into your very life, take God within oneself, embody him. (Rom 8:9) “’…you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.” What is the import of having the Spirit of Christ in us? Just as a person is more mature when he/she becomes an adult, making their own decisions, deciding to follow what the Law commands not from fear of Daddy’s punishment, as they did when a child, or from fear of police action, as they did when a teen-ager, but rather because as an adult we have, hopefully, internalized the Law, we know the reason for it, and self-choose the right thing to do because we have, again, hopefully, committed themselves to do the right. The Spirit of God in one is the active agent in internalizing ethical decisions, out of which we autonomously act. One is no longer operating out of fear. Christ in us is the carrot of our life, but not the stick.

In a hymn we sang 2 or 3 weeks ago, “You shall cross the barren desert,” there is an uncanny description for what Paul is saying in the Epistle: It’s “You shall see the face of God and live.”

Where does this phrase come from?—the idea of seeing the face of God and living? From ancient Hebrew thought, specifically from the Moses story. Remember the story of Moses going up alone up into Mt. Sinai to meet God and receive the Commandments? Moses asks God to remember that he has the whole tribe of Israel with him, that they are God’s people, shall he bring them all up? And God says No, only you shall come. You have found favor in my sight, and I know your name. “Knowing the name” of someone indicated a deep relationship existed, not just an acquaintanceship. It was the mutual recognition of the person of the other. God knew the community as His community, but he knew Moses as a person. God asked only the person he had a relationship with—Moses—to come up the mountain. And then he said this: (from Exodus 33)

“I will do the very thing that you have asked; for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name.” And Moses said, “Show me your glory, I pray.” And God said, “I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you the Name, ‘YHWH’….”But,” he said, “you cannot see my face, for no one shall see me and live…See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock, and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen.”

If you see the face of God you shall die!!

Moses can know God in a special way the community cannot, he can get special insight into God’s glory, or his goodness. God even exchanged names with him; God let Moses know his name, YHWH, which, in some text traditions, was unknown to the Jews at that time. But he cannot see God’s face, he cannot see God’s face and live; that is, he cannot plumb God’s mystery.

The hymn “You shall cross the barren desert” deliberately uses the opposite metaphor for the relationship of God to humans. The hymnist writes: “You shall see the face of God and live.!” It’s true—no one can plumb God’s mystery, but it’s not because God will not reveal himself, it’s because we are finite and God is infinite. I believe God delights in our plumbing the mysteries of him, and of the universe. The whole verse is this:

“You shall cross the barren desert, but you shall not die of thirst, You shall wander far in safety, though you do not know the way. You shall speak your words in foreign lands and all will understand. You shall see the face of God and live

How very different is what God now offers, what Jesus now is, what Paul now urges. Jesus has become “the face of God,” and to look on him is life. God’s incarnation in Jesus is the high point of God’s self-revelation to humankind. Earlier he divulged his name, he established a relationship with one man—Moses. Now he makes himself into a man, makes himself accessible to all.

For Christianity as well as in Judaism the religious life is yes, knowing God; it is, yes, doing God’s will, but it is also experiencing God, letting God’s Spirit inhabit us. The Hebrews were certain God was too unlike us, too perfect, for us to intimately encounter him. It would be presumptuous to think so. But Paul tells those who grew up in Judaism: Don’t leave the Law behind. Christ has not come to destroy the Law, but to fulfill it. Christ has come not to hide God, but to reveal him. Christ does not say, “If you see my face you shall die,” but “You shall see the face of God and live.” Paul would tell the Jews that they are lucky to know the Law, unlike the Gentiles. Just add to the knowledge of the Law the experience of God as the reason for the Law, and you will fulfill the Law. You shall see the face of God and live, live more fully. God’s love will inform each and every decision.

“You shall see the face of God and live” makes clearer what role Jesus has in relation to us. Jesus is “the face of God;” that’s what we mean when we say he is God, put by God out there for us to “see,” to appropriate, and thus to “live.” The words of the hymn move on to this: “You shall see the face of God and live. Be not afraid, I go before you always, Come follow me, And I will give you rest.”