

PREACHING AT CONVENTION LITURGY

Just before leaving Montana after nearly a decade of living and working there, my wife, I, and our two daughters were invited, by a local anthropologist colleague of mine who had been adopted into the Crow Indian tribe, to participate as best we might in one of the tribe's Sun Dance ceremonies. The memory of this remains robust, perhaps because of the clash of symbols we experienced: not only between our urban, modern palefaced experience and this remnant of an ancient, oral culture, but perhaps more acutely between this moving ritual and the Little Big Horn, the site of Custer's debacle with the Sioux, which was strangely nearby. Atop a presiding hill, we occupied the outer circle, composed of those participating through prayers, goodwill, offering material supports, fasting, and so on. The inner circle enclosed by trees was the site of the tribe's representatives, proven and tested people circling the great tree of life in the circle's center, a tree connecting earth and heavenly sky, keeping the one from collapsing on the other, whose roots symbolically strengthen the underground lest it collapse as well from the weight put upon it.

In one of those surprising reversals that our God seems to delight in, I have found the Crow to be wonderful exegetes of today's readings, especially that from Genesis 3. The Sun Dance is an example of what Chickasaw poet and novelist Linda Hogan described as a "kind of mind . . . less primitive than the rational present." The rhythmic dancing around the tree of life, accompanied by the harmony of chanting and the vibrations of drums, mends the broken connections between ourselves and the world, so that, as Linda Hogan writes, "We who easily grow apart from the world are returned to the great store of life all around us, and there is the deepest sense of being at home here in this intimate kinship." The time "when animals and people spoke the same tongue." If the Sun Dance celebrates harmony, the reading from Genesis remembers dissonance. It seems quite appropriate to approach our readings through the lens of the ancient Native American mind, for ancient mythical symbols have been taken up into Scripture: the garden of paradise reminds us of the inner circle of our dancers, where harmony between all of life reigns; and the tree of life is in this garden of paradise, in the center, just as in the Sun Dance; Adam and Eve represent humanity, as the dancers represent their tribe. The serpent is much celebrated in ancient cultures too: it represents the earth, from whose potent and mysterious depths it originates. The great difference, of course—and it makes all the difference in a way—is this: the Sun Dance looks to the sun for life, which can be said to symbolize nature at its most radiant and intense. The sun hints, but only hints, through its mysteriousness and unfathomability at the God Yahweh

who is revealed in Scripture as more potent than anything in nature, the sun included.

I have to admit that moving from the dancing of the Crows under the warm sun to the rather cheerless disharmony and blame throwing of our Genesis reading was not particularly pleasant. Reality has a way of asserting itself, as one philosopher has put it. The enmity between the serpent, representative of nature, and the woman, seems to express the loss of togetherness that results from not attuning ourselves to God, the true source of nature's life, and instead trying to usurp control of nature by taking God's place. The overall sense of the text is that the sin is one of trying to usurp the knowledge that is only appropriate to God. An obedient knowledge, one in harmony with God's intentions, is just fine. How else could Adam have named the creatures and could he and Eve have been partners to one another? But a disobedient knowledge, which overreaches itself, breeds disharmony and selfishness. Hence the blame throwing. (Is there a hint of sexism here? . . .)

Reality has a way of asserting itself. The venerable religions, and especially the historical faiths of Judaism and Christianity, seem to be a training for realism. This is part of why they speak to us, resonating with our depths. This is why we are attracted to Jesus, for he is so real. The reading from Mark portrays him locked in a struggle with Beelzebul. It was a struggle he had to prepare himself for; he had to undergo training in the desert. In Mark 1:12-13, the Spirit drove him into the desert to be tested by Satan and the wild beasts. Christianity is a training for realism. Realism, we say? Why then all this talk of Beelzebul or Satan, the Lord of the Flies, as it is sometimes translated? Is this real? Here perhaps we need to remember Linda Hogan's observation that the ancient mind is sometimes "the kind of mind that is less primitive than the rational present." The disintegrating force let loose in the universe is not as simple as a virus, it seems, that can be eliminated by a vaccine. Like a person, it appeals to our personal depths, and tempts us into thinking that "looking out for number one" is the gateway to a restored paradise. But it breeds disharmony, lack of integration. An antiperson "person," this Satanic Beelzebul.

But reality has a way of asserting itself. Years ago Father Chirico, who is celebrating this Mass, said in one of his classes—you see, Pete, I really did listen!—that you can have the dough without the hole, but not the hole without the dough. He was speaking of doughnuts in an attempt to talk about the problem of evil. Evil is a wound in being, a "hole" in that sense. It is a parasite. Parasites feed off of something much greater. How might our readings speak of this? Let me mention a few suggestions, and I invite you to think of others. From our side, there actually is something quite hopeful implied in our being confronted by Yahweh and held accountable for our actions: we are free and so responsible in some way; there is an important measure of freedom which we possess. This is the point of the seeming harsh statement to Mary in the Gospel. But we must remain real even here, and not fall overboard. After all, in the Genesis story, our

freedom must be awakened by God; somehow, apart from God it seems to turn into an unfreedom. And the Genesis story does not claim that our freedom will solve every problem; there is the serpent, representative of nature, who is out of sorts as well. There are natural and physical disasters which we by ourselves cannot control, it seems.

Yet Genesis tells us that God calls to us: "Where are you?" We are invited to look at the matter not only or even primarily from our side, but from God's side. God calls. God is not a spectator, but with us: "walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze," says Genesis (3:8). God calls us in our conscience, Genesis seems to be indicating. Let us not underestimate the significance of our conscience, that sanctuary where we are at one with God. That at-one-ment can be the radiating source of at-one-ment and so harmony in society and nature. But our consciences can be fragile, severely tested, and certainly unable to solve all of life's problems. Reality has a way of asserting itself. Is this why God raises up ministers in our midst, like Paul in today's reading, who do not lose heart, and by not losing heart, help us in our times of affliction not to lose heart either? Let us think of those who do this ministering to us, our bishops, priests, deacons, or other ministers, our family, our friends. But even our ministers, precious though they be, are fragile. By themselves, not even they are a match for some of life's travails. There is much suffering and iniquity we do not understand and cannot seem to solve. God comes to us in person, as Jesus, our faith dares to attest. The Son of God travels into the far country of our struggles, one great theologian has written. Mark's Gospel tells us that God in person is taking on the problem of evil and suffering in all its intensity. "Tying up the strong man," as Mark puts it. The Gospel seems very real, just here, where it is so hopeful. Any other solution would be totally unreal, because totally inadequate. Because God is taking on these struggles, likely there is much we will not adequately understand, at least now. But we hope. And so, like Jesus, we will probably even be accused of being out of our minds. Let us remember the advice of the humble Chickasaw poet Linda Hogan: There is a kind of mind that is less primitive than the rational present. Fortunately, Mark's Gospel seems to tell us, God is with us as the abiding Holy Spirit, the one who anointed Jesus and who anoints us with the courage not to lose hope. Let us not blaspheme this Spirit Who is less primitive than the rational present.

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