

Commentary on the Gospel for Sun, Aug 13th 2017

One of the results of growing older and striving to live by faith is that my views of God have changed. As a child, God was like my father in the flesh – quiet, aloof, seemingly uninterested in my day-to-day life, and quite able and willing to punish me when I needed correction. I was a practical deist; God wound up the world like an eight-day clock and, as it ran, he went off to other more interesting things, leaving the world to itself. I certainly believed in God and he was not totally about punishment to me. He just did not seem to care about me much and the feeling was mutual. Stereotypes and confused views of God die hard and it has taken me a lifetime to overcome this childish faith.

Living daily in the sacred writings certainly challenges our warped or one dimensional views of the nature of God. In the Old Testament reading we see one stereotype shattered. Elijah had faced off with the false prophets and God had shown that he alone is God by sending down fire and consuming the sacrifice in front of the people. Now Elijah is waiting for God to appear to him again. He is told that he should "Go outside and stand on the mountain before the Lord; the Lord will be passing by." God is powerful and he will again demonstrate that power. There is a heavy wind that is crushing rocks. God, surely you are in there. No. Then there was an earthquake. Not there either. Then there was a fire. The Lord was not in the fire. God was in a tiny whispering sound. Elijah saw God as the God of power and might. Of course, he was right about that. However, God is more than that. Do not look for God only in demonstrations of power. He is also in the weak, the tiny.

Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI has said that God is not a taker but a giver. This would come as a surprise to many people who think that God wants to take all of their fun away. The psalmist agrees with the pope. The Lord lets us see his kindness. The Lord grants us salvation. The Lord brings justice and peace. He causes truth to spring up. The Lord gives his benefits. Our land yields its increase. God gives, gives, and then gives. As the saying goes, he gives until it hurts. The apostle Paul describes Jesus as the father's indescribable gift. In another place he asks, What do you have that you have not received? Everything we have comes from God and he does not give grudgingly. He loves a cheerful giver because he is one. In the second reading the same apostle says that he is willing to give his future eternal happiness if it could lead to the conversion of his kindred according to the flesh. This is the spirit of Jesus who gave himself for others.

In the Gospel reading Jesus tells a fearful group of disciples, "Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid." How many times have you seen a movie or read a book where the assumption is that, when God shows up, everyone is either afraid or should be? Jesus, however, does not want us to be afraid. Trusting him and being unafraid does not diminish him or his power. In the same story Jesus is walking on water. He is Lord of heaven and earth. But he doesn't need this affirmed by a bunch of sniveling, scared-out-of-their-sandals, disciples. We can be a people of reverence and awe and not be afraid of God.

My childhood views have changed but what views of God do I have today that need to go away?