

## What and Whom Do You Follow?

Prayer: Come Lord Jesus in all our longings, may you be near.

The scriptures in today's readings all bring questions to me. Two main ones that occur to me are "What can we do in difficult circumstances which we encounter" and "Whom do we follow?"

The story of Abraham and Isaac is disturbing, is it not? God says to Abraham, as a test, take your son, kill him and burn him as an offering. Abraham sets out to comply and God at the last minute stops him from killing his son. Without getting caught up in issues of child killing and abuse and trauma, I think the point of the story is God's asking Abraham – "Is it me that you follow? Are there higher priorities in your life than following your creator?"

About a week ago I was with a group of prison inmates who meet weekly as part of a Christian prison community to share the wonder and the challenges of their emerging journey. One of them shared with the group that when he looks back on his early life (he has been in prison almost 40 years) he sees it as a kind of insanity - which he lived a life based on bad decision after bad decision which at the time seemed to make sense to him. He, in his own words, ran over other people, hurt people and let his hunger for power, status, and possessions control his life. "It never ever occurred to me," he said "to consider that God called me to a life very different from the one I was living, and that that kind of life would be far, far better in any way I can imagine than the one I was for living both for me and for the persons that crossed my path."

It is a good question, is it not: What and whom do you follow?

For better or worse, the human condition that we are given provides us with the ability to make choices. We are free to choose one thing or another. We are free, within limits, to choose one way of life or another. We are free to follow one path or another.

The Abraham and Isaac story also is a reminder, at a very basic and simple level, that some disturbing and challenging things can and sometimes do enter our life. You and I hear about them all the time in the lives of others. It is the content of most of what we find in journalism. And it makes us uneasy, at best. And of course sometimes unsettling and maybe even traumatic things hit close to home or even thrust themselves into our own lives. My sense of and experience with God does not leave a lot of room for seeing God as the direct agent of bringing frightening and troubling things into our lives, but my sense of life is that frightening and disturbing things are very much a part of life.

It seems to me that the scriptures read earlier this morning are in conversation with each other. They seem to reflect a conversation, perhaps an archetypal conversation, which takes place among individuals and groups. I find it to be a conversation that regularly bounces around in my own head with some regularity.

The Genesis passage (as I just mentioned) reminds us that harsh realities are part of life. And it draws us to that important question whom will we follow? I.e. what is the basis of our guidance through the ups and the downs of life?

The Psalmist says . . . . . well let me say it plainly. . . . the psalmist says “HELP! Can’t you give us a little help here, God? I have pain in my soul, give me some light in this darkness, my foes are getting the best of me; I do not know how long I can hold out. I know you can do it, God, it will be so great when you save me and us from this.”

Isn’t this too a part of the life experience – at least for many of us? I have been in life spaces, quite a few times I can tell you, where I felt that I really, really needed help and resources and guidance that could only come from sources beyond anything I have within myself or anything that is available to me in my normal experience and environment. I think it is fair to predict that you have been there too.

Help. Please help, God. My need is great. My trust is in you.

Then the passage from the letter to Romans, among other things, reminds us that the stakes are high in this game of life. This is no casual thing, this journey of life. Well, often it can be fun and casual and laid back, but in the long run it is a fairly serious drama with a myriad of circumstances which prompt the necessity for making decisions, all of which produce consequences. Yes, indeed, it says, you can choose the way of life that is based on your inclinations and elevation of self as the center of the universe or you can choose the way in response to God’s call to a higher, and often more challenging way. In stark terms this passage says we human beings in finding our way from day to day and from situation to situation and from issue to issue are dealing with matters of life and death.

Ultimately all of us are going to die, of course - although my mother, soon to be 95 is beginning to wonder if she is an exception. But she too will experience what we commonly refer to as death – biological death when the body ceases to function as a living organism. But in this passage from Romans, Paul is speaking about a concept of death which comes to us before the moment when our heart stops beating and someone signs a death certificate. We can choose a path, he tells us, that that brings us to life or maybe better said, brings life to us. It is a quality of life that comes when we find out who we really are and what it is that we are meant to do. I have seen (and you have seen) persons who, though living are dead – spiritually dead. I have seen and you have seen persons who were dead in that way who have come alive.

I get to see that quite a lot of that in working with prison inmates who somehow grow up in prison and come to find who they are at a deeper and richer level, usually through a spiritual awakening. I took a small group of persons in a class I was teaching just a few days ago to meet a group of men who have come to life and awakened in that setting which encourages and reinforces a response of death rather than life. One of the inmates in addressing members of our class actually used those very words. He said “I was dead

in here for many years, but I have now come alive.” It brings to mind the words of the father in the prodigal son story “My son was dead, but now is alive.”

I think also whole countries or even parts of the world can make decisions and find themselves in a kind of collective death. Recently I saw again the remarkable documentary on the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The film is called Long Night’s Journey into Day. In my mind that was a country which was functioning economically and politically, but was experiencing a kind of death through its domination and oppression and exploitation of the many by the powerful few. The film shows a piece of the process by which that country became aware of the death it perpetrated and embraced and its coming to awareness of the death grip of its “legitimate” institutions. But also the film documents South Africa’s beginning to chart a new course which opened the possibility for new life for many human souls and for the nation itself.

So, this part of the conversation plays out, does it not again and again, I think, in countless settings. “Things can get pretty bad and harmful and frightening,” says one. Another says “Indeed that happens, often in ways that only later come to our awareness and, by the way, who can we turn to when that happens? Can there be help for us, help from God, help from our Creator?” And another says: “We may not have thought so but all this stuff we are talking about is really serious business. It is a life and death matter.”

Left at that point we who participate in the conversation are unsettled, to say the least. We have fear and anxiety, maybe even points of despair. Our tendency is to call for help. Those of us in the Christian tradition call to our Source – maybe in words like these.

Come to us God, do not forget us.

Come to us, Holy Spirit. Come, Holy Spirit, come.

Come to us Lord Jesus, come as you promised. Come Lord Jesus in all our longings, may you be near.

But when we listen with all our hearts, no matter what the circumstances we face, no matter what the circumstances we humans have created which look nothing, absolutely nothing, like the Kingdom Jesus proclaimed, we hear and find and can see Good News being proclaimed in the midst of bad news. We can find it in expressions, we find it in behaviors. We find it in kindness and respect and honesty. We find it in forgiveness and hope and mercy. We find it in reconciliation and redemption and humility. We find it in interconnectedness and empowerment and transformation. We find it in peace and nonviolence and caring and commitment. We find it in liberation and healing and in letting go. We find it in gratitude. Thank God it is there, embodied and proclaimed by brave and loving souls. Thank God we can find our own way to that goodness and love which lives in us and thank God we can become agents of the Good News. Thank God it can even be embodied in the culture’s institutional framework.

Thank God that there is light in the darkness and that we can see it and participate in it and even reflect it ourselves.

I must confess that there are things other than the Holy and the Good News that call to me and distract me from what is really important. Things and power and images and stuff of this world are what I have followed much of my life on occasion and which still distract me now at times. Who among us can not say that? But I can also tell you that for some reason(s) my call to the Holy is becoming more urgent in recent times. I don't know, maybe it is my age and maybe it is just part of this stage of life, but I think there is indeed a lot in this culture, this country, this world, this period of history that is very unsettling and deeply disturbing. My plea with sincerity and urgency uses those same words:

Come to us God, do not forget us.

Come to us, Holy Spirit. Come, Holy Spirit, come.

Come to us Lord Jesus, come as you promised. Come Lord Jesus in all our longings, may you be near.

As I was thinking about all this I heard a song, the words of which make a heartfelt plea to the Holy. "Come" the words say, "Come Lord Jesus." But the words also show confidence and trust in, and deep awareness of the rich symbolic content which follows from what it means when "our Lord comes." That is, the Good News.

The songwriter uses an Aramaic word which appears only one time in the New Testament (1 Corinthians 16:22). The word is Maranatha. It is translated as "Our Lord Come." The name of the song, written by Francis Patrick O'Brien, is Maranatha Come. Let me share these words with you.

Maranatha come, come Lord Jesus.  
Maranatha come, come oh come.

Wisdom of God, guiding creation  
Lead us in ways that are faithful to your name.

Oh sacred one, come in your glory  
Stretch forth your hand and we shall be free.

Maranatha come, come Lord Jesus.  
Maranatha come, come oh come.

From Jesse's stem, raise up your people.  
Let nothing keep you from coming to our age.

Oh royal power, Oh king of David.

Open up the heavens and lead us into love.

Maranatha come, come Lord Jesus.  
Maranatha come, come oh come.

So straight and tall, Oh son of justice,  
Shine on your people in darkness and in death.

Ruler of all, joy of our longing,  
Come save the people you fashioned from the dust.

Maranatha come, come Lord Jesus.  
Maranatha come, come oh come.

Savior of all, hope of the nations,  
Bring us to freedom, Emanuel.

Maranatha come, come Lord Jesus.  
Maranatha come, come oh come.

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Genesis 22: 1-14  
Psalm 13; Romans 6: 12-23  
Matthew 10: 40-42