

Fr. Thomas Esposito, O.Cist.
First Friday Mass
Cistercian Abbey - September 2, 2011
Reading: Colossians 1:15-20

We are not so very different than the community of believers at Colossae who received a letter from Saint Paul. They gathered together to listen to the letter proclaimed and then interpreted by one of their own, perhaps a disciple of Jesus; afterwards, they broke bread, the early way of speaking about the Eucharist.

Thanks to this First Friday liturgy, we too are Colossians tonight, gathered to praise and meet the Lord. Pondering who the recipients of this letter were is a wonderful way to bring the Scriptures to life; after all, we just read the same verses which they first listened to so many centuries ago. This letter links us in bonds of faith and love to that early community.

Our first reading, however, has *never* been an easy one to understand. It begins with a very curious phrase: *He is the image of the invisible God*. An image, we think to ourselves, must surely be of something visible: a body, a tree, a copy of something we can touch or see. We cannot take a photo of an invisible man; nothing would show up! What, then, does the author of the letter mean when he calls Christ the image of the invisible God?

Thankfully, the author has left us some valuable clues to guide our interpretation; in fact, he was almost certainly thinking of one particular OT passage when he wrote these verses. When we read the words “image”, “God”, “the beginning”, “heaven and earth”, “created things”, we immediately think of Genesis 1. And what do we read there?

Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness’... God created man in his image; in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

There are two mysteries interwoven in these few verses. The first lies in the grammar: God speaks with the royal “we”, yet the verb is in the singular: “God created”, not “they created”. This passage gives us our first glimpse into the invisible mystery of the Trinity. When the author of Colossians read Genesis 1, he received an insight into the mystery of God, an insight which we too have received through his letter:

inspired by the Holy Spirit, he realized that the Son was present “in the beginning” as the wisdom of the Father, “through whom and in whom all things were made in heaven and on earth”.

The second mystery unveiled in Genesis 1 is our identity as human beings, male and female, created in the image of God. Just as a statue is sculpted to evoke its model, and just as a coin bears the likeness of someone’s head stamped on it, we reflect our divine Maker. An even better analogy: as children bear the features of their mother and father, so too are we a cast, a mold, of our divine, Triune maker. For us, image *is* everything, for it gives us infinite dignity as the crown jewel of God’s creation.

But what exactly *is* this image? It would seem to be a combination of our unique reason and free will, our ability to know God and to freely love God. As we know from Scripture and our own experience, though, we freely chose (and choose) to tarnish that image: by means of sin and our rejection of God’s love, we deface our statue with the divine likeness on it, we throw our coin into the dirt, to be covered in filth. When we sin, we no longer represent the glory of God, our maker. We choose instead to adore the images of the world, makings false idols of money, clothes, sex, or our own majestic selves. These idols, in turn, fashion us in *their* image, and we begin to live no longer joyfully for the God who made us, but miserably for the gods who enslave us.

What is the Son’s response to our self-abuse, our tarnishing of his once glorious creation? The author of Colossians tells us in beautiful terms: He, the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, the wisdom of God binding all creation together, freely chooses to give us an image of God which we can neither tarnish nor erase: that image is the face of Jesus, of God the Son, the wisdom of God made flesh. When Jesus becomes a human being, made in the image of God just like us, the Psalmist’s prayer is fulfilled: “God of hosts, bring us back; let your face shine on us and we shall be saved.”

The words and deeds of Jesus, which we find in the Gospels, show us how he reveals the invisible God. They instruct us in the divine logic of love which God uses to restore our dignity as His image. Jesus’ passion and death, as the letter to the Colossians puts it, reconciles us back to God, “making peace through the blood of his cross”. Christ, the Son and image of God, makes of us a new creation, and refashions us in his image: he grants us the status of fellow sons and daughters of God in faith. As a result, we are most perfectly ourselves, we are most joyful, we are most free, when our life is lived as a response to Christ’s redeeming love for us.

Whenever God the Father looks upon us, once broken images of His love, He sees the image of His son Jesus. The greatest proof of love in any relationship is sacrifice, and it is Jesus who loved us

enough to suffer for us. He did this to become our brother, to share our lot in life and then share the glory of his eternal relationship to the Father with us. It is Jesus who allows us to call God “our Father”. Christ, the author of life, the author of our faith, has found our lost coin for us; like the woman in the Gospel story, he invites all of us to celebrate the finding of what had been misplaced- our pure image- in the dirt of sin.

Jesus meets us tonight, in the Scriptures and the breaking of the bread, to remind us that he created us out of sheer love and redeemed us by that same logic of love. This wisdom, my dear Colossians, is not easy to grasp; if it were, it would never guide us into the inscrutable mysteries of God. It does, however, give us a peace beyond all understanding when we seek His wisdom with a pure heart, and allow ourselves to be loved by him. He is the head of his body, the Church, whose members we are blessed to be. Let us rejoice together that Christ found our image to be worth restoring; let us give thanks to Christ for having given that image an eternal brilliance which no false idol can claim; & let us live joyfully, as sons and daughters of light, in the presence of the Lord.

INTERCESSIONS

We come to Christ, the source of all wisdom, and ask Him to bring our petitions before His- and our- heavenly Father.

1. For the students of the University of Dallas and our Cistercian prep school; that they may never cease to thirst after the true and life-giving waters which only Christ can offer, we pray to the Lord.
2. For an increase in vocations to the priesthood and religious life; that the Lord may find an abundance of laborers ready to give up everything they have and follow Him, let us pray to the Lord.
3. For those who do not know the wisdom of Christ; that they may be drawn to Him by the joyful witness of our own faith, we pray to the Lord.
4. For all who are sick and suffering illness, whether physical or spiritual; that they may know the healing comfort of the divine Physician, we pray to the Lord.
5. For those who have died; may they be granted the full vision of God's face in unapproachable light, we pray to the Lord.
6. For our own intentions, in silence; we pray to the Lord.

Father, hear the prayers we offer you in the name of your Son. Please grant them as they be good for us. We ask this through Christ our Lord.