

Church of the Good Shepherd
and
St. John the Evangelist

10 Pentecost
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Fr. Bill McGinty

“In Prison with Jimmy”

In 1981 I was in prison. It was one of those old Victorian prisons just south of the river in London. The walls inside were made of a red shiny brick. The doors are metal, but heavily studded. The cells are real small, the upper ones with a catwalk around. This particular day I was sitting at a table on the ground floor talking to Jimmy. Jimmy seemed to gravitate to me possibly because he too was Irish and spoke with an accent. To everyone else it was just an Irish accent, but to me it held the soft purr of Belfast, Northern Ireland’s largest city.

“Ay!” said Jimmy. His full name was Jimmy McIlroy. “But, how do you know? How do you know there even is a God, or heaven or any of that? What if you die and there’s just nothing! Would that make you feel wild stupid?”

This was about week three of: ‘is there a God or isn’t there a God?’ An argument that went on between Jimmy and me forever. “See, the last time I was speakin’ to you, well I went back to my cell and I was thinking after the lock-down. If there’s no God and no heaven, what’s the point of being good? Answer me that now! If there’s no heaven and no hell then nothing matters. We can do anything we like ‘cause there are no consequences. Get out of that, Father!” said Jimmy triumphantly.

One or two heads turned to see my reaction or hear my response, but most carried on reading the newspaper, smoking their cigarette, playing cards or watching the soccer-match on the T.V. in the corner.

I looked across the table at Jimmy and said: “Have you got a grandmother?”

“Yes.” Said Jimmy. “She’s eighty-four.”

“Would you think of taking her down to the ocean, when she gets to be ninety and launching her out to sea in a small boat in winter weather?” said I.

“No!” said Jimmy, with horror on his face.

“Eskimos used to do that with their old, years ago,” I said. “When grandma or grandpa couldn’t travel anymore they put them on an ice-flow and pushed them out to sea! Of course they would freeze to death in three or four hours!”

“That’s sick!” Said Jimmy. “Priests like you shouldn’t know stories like that! That is so wrong!”

“I thought you didn’t believe in right and wrong!” says I. “What happened to no heaven, no God and no right or wrong? “

The Rev. William J. McGinty, Rector
110 West Catharine Street, Milford, Pennsylvania 18337
Phone: (570) 296-8123 ♦ Fax: (570) 296-4383

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Jimmy came back to the table from the chair he had been rocking on and after checking right and left to make sure no one was really listening; he said in hushed tones: “Well there is some things that are always going to be wrong! Like – you do your wife’s head in with a rusty axe, because she’s been nagging you all day to take out the garbage! I mean, you have to know that that is wrong! Right?”

“Yes, but how do you know?” Says I. Egging him on! “Like is it written down somewhere?”

Immediately, and without thinking Jimmy took the bait. “It’s one of The Commandments! “ He blurted out.

“They don’t count!” say I. “If you don’t believe in God then you can’t believe in his Commandments! Try again, Jimmy. Or do you just feel happy doing your wife’s head in with a rusty axe?”

“You just feel it, that’s what!” said Jimmy exasperated. “Like right in here!” And he began tapping his own chest.

“That’s right!” said I grasping the opportunity. “We all feel it right in here, we know don’t we? We know deep in our soul when something is right or wrong? It’s our moral compass. We all have one and it tells us right from wrong. We are moral agents. We can choose!”

“I suppose your right!” said Jimmy, dragging on his cigarette and beginning to lose interest in the argument. But I wouldn’t let him off the hook.

“Do you think dogs are moral agents?” Says I. “I mean does a dog know right from wrong?”

“I don’t know !” Says Jimmy suspicious now that there is a trap just around the corner.

“I mean have you ever seen a dog with a mask robbing a bank?” Jimmy looks at me as if I have two heads. “I’m only kidding. “ I say. “But do you think Rover jumps up on the kitchen table and says to himself: ‘now shall I eat the apple pie? Is it right or is it wrong?’ “

“Of course not!” says Jimmy mocking me. “Dogs can’t make moral decisions. They eat, sleep and do their business. That’s their whole life. They don’t have this!” he says, tapping his chest. “They don’t have a compass!”

“What about elephants?” I said.

“No.” Said Jimmy.

“Lions?”

“No.”

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“Monkeys?”

“No.”

“Crocodiles?”

“No! No! No!” Says Jimmy. “Only humans.” Only humans can be moral. Not cats. Not dogs. Humans!”

“But why humans?” Why are we so special?” I said.

“They have intellect. They think about things. They weight things up. They make moral judgments!” Said Jimmy.

“So why humans?”

“Because they are on a different level.” Animals are animals; humans are something more.”

“Like higher?” I asked. “Like created for something more?”

“Yes”, said Jimmy. “We are made better. Like if animals are a Mini Cooper then humans are a Rolls Royce.”

“If you are made, it means you were created, and if you were created there must be a Creator, and if a Creator, he has to be God. Maybe he’s the one who put in place the moral laws and gave us that compass in the first place, Jimmy.”

Just then the bell sounded and everyone got to their feet. The guards came in and the prisoners began to shovel back to their cells.

“See, you again next week, Father.” Said Jimmy with a wave and his toothy Belfast grin. I think he just really liked the company and the chat, but you never know. Nights in a prison cell can be long and it’s always good to have something to think about.

I had to pass through the usual set of doors and gates to get out. When I got to the carpark I put on my helmet and climbed on board my motorcycle. It was one of those wet misty days when the fog comes up off the river. As I pulled on to the main road, I didn’t see this taxi come around the corner. He swerved, banged his horn, hung out the window and shouted: “Hey, vicar, what’s your name, death?”

Morality is enormously important to us. There is something about the goodness of a person that communicates itself to others. They say dogs and horses have an instinct for whether a person is good or bad.

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Solomon in the first reading tells God that his Father David, despite his faults was at heart a good person. “He walked before you in faithfulness and rightness...”

Because of this God had a great love for David. That love is passed on to Solomon who asks not for riches or power, but for the wisdom to know right from wrong.

Getting it right isn't always easy. I sometimes wonder if “always being right is the same as always being good?”

Goodness touches on our very nature and perhaps our very soul. When we consider someone good, we seem to find empathy and common ground with them. If we ever lose that goodness, we know how hard it is to get it back.

Paul in Romans 8 reminds his readers that Jesus the Savior did not come to save us because we were good, but because we were weak and sinners. He tells us that because of the Gospel and what Jesus did for us we are now all in the one great melting pot. Rich, poor, sick, whole, Jew, Greek, powerful and powerless.

“Christ has died that the ungodly might be saved. He alone can judge us and make each one of us whole again.”

At times I think about Jimmy sitting in his cell wondering about the great mysteries of the universe. I wonder if he ever reached for the Gideon Bible and turned and found this passage from Paul that said:” with faith in Christ you are already saved!”

And for each of us the same is true. The Gospel story of the “Treasure in the Field” tells us: “Buy what Jesus is selling!” The kingdom of heaven is possible to build if you have faith. It sounds easy. It is easy, when the sun is out and shining on all of us. But in rainy, storm-tossed days it is not easy. That is why we have the Gospel, the Sermon on the Mount, to add to that compass we carry inside ourselves. The Gospel gives us courage and the gifts of the Spirit. If we don't have them we should pray for them; if we do have them we should share them with others.

The Gospel is not easy. The Gospel is serious theology, serious ministry. Let us pray that we can conduct ourselves with the holiness and goodness it deserves.

Amen+

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