

Church of the Good Shepherd and St. John the Evangelist

4 Pentecost
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Fr. Bill McGinty

“God is Found in Love!”

Early in the month of June a great Theologian died in England. His name was John MacQuarrie and he was a Scotsman.

MacQuarrie was a biblical scholar and probably one of the last of a great group of scholars who challenged us to rethink the way we think about the Bible.

Up till the end of the 19th century people more or less took the bible literally as a single book written continuously and then divided into some 46 books in the Old Testament and 27 books of the New Testament.

Between 1888 and the present, the amount we know about those 73 books is vast.

What you have to understand about Bible writings is that they did not appear from nowhere. God did not write it all on tablets of stone. Nor was it written by Moses as many fundamentalists believe.

We say that the Hebrews first began to write down their stories about 1050 years before Christ. However, many of the stories are much older than that going back to 2400 BC. They had been preserved orally by being repeated over and over.

It is difficult for us to grasp that kind of time frame, because as Americans we have a national history of 231 years. Even our new world only has a history of 515 years.

The Jewish writers collected stories from 1400 years of their tribe's experiences and wrote about them. All their stories' all their literature was affected by one event. It re-occurs through out the Old Testament, it is that their God saved them from being slaves in Egypt and saved them from the waters of the Red Sea.

It is an event that they celebrated each year and one they never forgot.

Because of it they entered into a covenant with God on Mount Sinai a covenant that bound them to the one God for ever.

It's almost impossible to say how unique this was among the peoples of the world in those days.

Israelites had a concept of God that was so much more advanced than any other people, while others even the Greeks and Romans had many Gods; they had one. They said that

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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there could only be one God and that he had revealed himself to them and chosen them to be his special people.

In an age when slavery was common and human sacrifice the norm, a covenant based on love was both advanced and unique.

The Jews were a unique people and what makes them unique is that you cannot make a separation between them as a nation and them as a religious people. The history of Israel is the history of God's people and they knew it.

O from time to time many of her leaders would go astray, but the people themselves lived their lives by their faith in God. In today's first reading Ahab and Jezebel live after the time of David and Solomon and probably in the Northern Kingdom. Kingship and wealth and power have taken them away from following the covenant, the law and the Ten Commandments. Now only Elijah the Prophets stands up to condemn them and their evil ways.

But Elijah has to flee southwards for his life. Everything that happens to him in today's passage reflects Israel's past and her true relationship with God. First he goes into the wilderness, the home of the tribes for hundreds of years. An angel comes to him as it did to Abraham and Jacob. He eats bread in the desert as his ancestors did. He travels 40 days and 40 nights as Moses did. He climbs a mountain and speaks to God.

"What are you doing here, Elijah?" he is asked.

Elijah replies that he has fled because the covenant is broken and they are killing the Prophets. He is told to stand on the mountaintop while the Spirit of God passes by. God comes to him in the sound of silence and bids him return home to continue his work as his prophet.

Why did the writer write this story and in this way? It is a message to the whole nation that it is only by returning to the covenant that Israel will ever find her way back to God and back to goodness.

Fire, wind, and earthquake may bring fear, but they do not bring God. God exists only in the quiet stillness of our hearts where love resides.

This week I skipped again to that passage from 1 Corinthians that speaks of love to read it one more time. It is not written by Shakespeare or Yeats or some great romantic poet. It is written by a little bald headed, bad tempered Jewish lawyer called Paul, who finds it really hard not to fight with the other Apostles.

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But if Paul is steeped in the Old Testament, then he must know of the love that binds God to his people.

People chose this passage for weddings all the time, but it's not about married love. It is about our love for God and his love for us. Paul writes:

“If I speak in the tongues of men and of Angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have Prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge and if I have all faith so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all that I have and deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.”

“Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, endures all things.”

“Love never ends; as for prophecies, they will pass away, as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge it will pass away. For our knowledge is imperfect and our prophecy is imperfect, but when the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away.”

“When I was a child, I spoke like a child; I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child, when I became a man I gave up childish ways.”

“For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I should understand fully, even as I have been fully understood.”

“So faith, hope, love abide, these three, but the greatest of these is love.”

It is almost as if Paul has had a near death experience or stood on Elijah's mountain and encountered God. The word in Greek that he uses is *agape*. The Greek have four words for love, *Eros*, *Philos*, *Storge* and *Agape*. *Agape* is the highest form of love. *Agape* is where you give everything even your life for what you truly believe.

The Christians, at the time of Paul, believed that when they gathered and celebrated the Lord's Supper God became present among them. They believed that this was true *agape*. *Agape* reaches into human hearts and binds them together with God's spirit.

In today's Gospel from Luke, Jesus encounters a demoniac called Legion, who lives among the tombs. The lesson of the passage is simple and clear. Without God we return to our primordial state. It is a state without grace where there is no shame, only torment and unhappiness.

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The decision is ours, live in God's love or choose the empty death of the spirit. The story is of course full of Greek dualism and the struggle between matter and spirit. It is not lost on Luke who is both a Greek and a doctor. He has seen the worst that humans can descend to and in the person of Jesus he sees what love at its best is capable of. Choose to love, Luke teaches us, and it will transform your life.

Amen+

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