

4th SUNDAY OF THE YEAR - C - 2007
“Faith and Reason”

It all started out so well. As we heard last week, the people of Nazareth, Jesus’ home town, were thrilled with Jesus when he stood up and read from Isaiah the prophet about being anointed to bring good tidings to the poor, liberty to captives, sight to the blind and setting the oppressed free. Even when he added, *“Today this scripture passage is fulfilled with your hearing,”* all the people spoke highly of him, and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. A local boy was making good. Jesus’ preaching ministry was starting off with a bang. Then someone ruined it all by asking a simple, almost foolish question. *“Isn’t this the son of Joseph?”* He may as well have asked, *“Who does he think he is? What gives him the right to tell us the scriptures are talking about him, like he was some kind of messiah?”*

When Jesus responds by referring to prophets not being accepted in their home town, things start to get ugly. He speaks of two miracles performed by two Old Testament prophets, Elijah and Elisha. The problem is that the miracles were not performed for the benefit of the Jews but for the benefit of Gentiles. Knowing the miracles stories well, the people apparently took Jesus words as a personal insult. I can just hear some hot head yell from the crowd, *“What’s wrong Jesus, aren’t we good enough for you?”* And with that, the riot was on. Pretty soon, voices called for action. *“Let’s throw him off the cliff!”* The frenzied crowd was soon drunk on their imagined power and totally caught up in their self righteous cause, so it was not hard for Jesus to simply walk away, and that’s what he did.

It was a bad first day on the job. Things had to get better, and they would, but the battle was joined. Truth can be a hard pill to swallow. And

to see the truth, Jesus knew people had to believe in him. He had to develop a strategy that would enable people to see the world the way he saw it; to see themselves as he saw them; to understand God as he understood God.

He had a formidable task before him, but in some ways, we face a more formidable task today. In Jesus time, faith was almost universal. Everyone believed in something beyond themselves, gods of all kinds, spirits of every stripe. Jesus had to get people to understand that he was the incarnation of the one true God, the creator of everything, the God who loved all, and saw the dignity of all. He had to get people to believe that God had become one of them, to life them up, out of their sin and their miserable lives of oppression and injustice. In Jesus' day, there was no such thing as an atheist. Getting people to believe was not hard. To get them to believe in him was the challenge.

Today, to get people to believe in anything is the challenge. You'd think that for some it's almost a badge of honor to claim to be an atheist, or at least an agnostic. An atheist believes there is no God. And agnostic believes we cannot know for sure if there is or isn't. Notice, they both believe something they cannot prove. I recently heard an atheist on the radio, and he sounded arrogant, condescending toward those who hold to faith as a means of knowing truth. What gave rise to this modern day phenomenon is what is called the *Age of Enlightenment* of the 17th and 18th centuries. All dogmas of the church were simply cast aside because they were not the product of science or reason. Science and reason became the sole determiners of what is true and what is false. While some Christians may think that faith and reason are mutually exclusive, that is not the case in the Catholic Church. The compatibility of reason and faith has been a major theme of Pope Benedict XVI. Both are needed to know truth.

Let me say that we should be deeply indebted to the Enlightenment. Science is not a bad thing, but good. And so is reason. After all, Jesus came to take away our sins not our brains. At issue is the claim that we cannot know truth unless it is verified by science or reason. Please notice that that is the dogma behind atheism. As G.K. Chesterton said, *“There are two kinds of people, those who accept dogmas and know it and those who accept dogmas and don’t know it.”* It should also be noted that even scientific evidence is rejected by those who claim it as the sole source of truth. To say a human embryo is not human life is unscientific. The big fight today on stem cell research is not over a monkey’s embryo or a salamander’s embryo, but over a human embryo. The DNA of an unborn child is the DNA of a human being. This is an inconvenient truth many so called secularists refuse to admit.

Ironically, saying that science and reason are the only ways to know truth leads to a society that is suspicious and insecure. *“Prove it to me that your vision of reality is the true one? Why should I trust you?”* We don’t trust institutions like government, corporations, or church; we trust only ourselves and we as individuals become the standard of what is true or not. That’s insane. And when we don’t trust anyone, a society falls apart. You see, trust is the oil of relationships. Without trust, no relationship can hold together, such is the nature of human relationships. If we didn’t have faith in one another, we certainly wouldn’t be here.

The doctrine of creation, for example, which was thrown out like the baby with the bath, teaches us that the world is basically good. It says that we were created in the image of God, and we have a dignity beyond our comprehension. Now, what does “good” look like under a microscope? Can you test for human dignity in a Petri dish? How instrument can weigh

the amount of love in a human heart? These are ridiculous questions because goodness and dignity and love are not the subject of science. To limit our vision of truth to what science alone can tell us is like plucking out one's eye.

How did Jesus get people to believe in him? He showed them a goodness they had never experienced before, in himself and in them, and he acted on it. He showed them a way of seeing reality that touched their deepest longings for love, justice and peace. He showed compassion to the nobodies and forgiveness to the sinners. He changed their view of the world from black and white into color. We never have to be ashamed of our faith in Jesus. While it can't answer questions about how the physical world works, it does answer why we are here, and it gives a meaning to our lives that no one will ever find in a laboratory.

One day a rabbi asked his students, "How can you tell that night has ended and the day is dawning?" One student suggested, "When you can see clearly that an animal in the distance is a lion and not a leopard." "No" said the rabbi. Another said, "When you can tell when a tree bears figs and not peaches." "No" said the rabbi. "It is when you can look on the face of another person and see that that woman or man is your sister or brother. Because until you are able to do so, no matter the time of day it is, it is still night."

May the Eucharist we now celebrate deepen our faith and continue the transformation of our hearts.