

Easter IV Year C

We are now at the fourth Sunday of Easter... so we are continuing our readings in the gospel of John... in fact, we will continue reading in John throughout Easter, and Pentecost Sunday, and Trinity Sunday.... And then we'll return to our readings in Luke.... When people are asked, "What is their favorite gospel?" Most people will say the gospel of John... It is probably the most quotable of the gospels.... "I am the way the truth and the life."... I am the good shepherd (we just heard read)... I am the vine, you are the branches.... And of course there is John 3:16 made famous by the guy with the rainbow afro at football games on T.V. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son so that all who believed in him would have eternal life." The resurrection appearances in John bristle with energy and light... but for all of its popularity, this gospel I think is the least understood.... So in that regard, since I am kind of on a little bit of a context roll these days... I want to talk about the context of this gospel... or perhaps a better way to put it is... the 'ethos' of this gospel, so that perhaps while we are reading the somewhat cryptic and allusionary language of John we might be better able to take it to heart... beyond a quotable quote... perhaps with some context we might better be able to be taught by this unique piece of literature that really stands apart from the other gospels.

Now as you know the language in which the New Testament literature was written is Greek... Greek was the language of the Academy... the most common language of the empire... the language of historians... the language of philosophy... the language of commerce... sort of the way English is today... And even though early Christianity had its roots in Judaism... still the language was Greek... and language carries with it cultural ethos and aesthetics... the religious categories of Judaism are given to us in Greek... and those categories are reshaped as it were by the artifice of language... For example: The Jewish God Yahweh is one of many gods... the most powerful of the gods, the one who created the world, and this god, the true God has chosen a particular people to liberate.... When the Greeks speak of God they are speaking of a universal god... a principle of truth that governs all things, all people... the unifying God of all gods... It is a common misconception that ancient Judaism was a monotheistic faith.... But monotheism as we know it belongs to the Greeks... So Early Christianity, as it makes its way into the third and fourth centuries C.E., is a syncretization of

eastern, Semitic, tribal religion with a sophisticated, cosmopolitan philosophy.... The very concept of God shaped by language.

Y'all with me? The Greek philosophical ethos as it relates to God is rooted in Platonic thought... and here is the cliff notes version of the Platonic idea of the cosmos... God and heaven are up in the ether... up here... and the world is down here... a decided hierarchy... after all this is a patriarchal society.... God up there... the world down here.... God is unchanging, immovable, complete unto Godself... In God is all truth, all order, all knowledge.... Down here we are subject to change and mutability... subject to evil and violence... the whole idea of a fallen creation is not Judaism, but a concept of the Greeks.

For Plato, however, even in this earthly life, one could know truth, or at least glimpses of it by observing things in earth... Indeed, the philosophical ideal of the Greeks was the quest to know the truth, to know God.... the idea being that the created order bears signs, bears the artistry of the creator, that the things of earth bear the marks of the one unifying truth.... Take for example the chair, that ancient of contraptions.... How it masterfully diffuses and distributes one's weight, so that one may sit and rest while upright... the physics of the chair are indeed exquisite... obtuse angles conspiring for our comfort, forgiving incidental movement.... There are chairs in the great museums of the world... So the chair on earth represents chairness, if you will, in heaven... and then there are trout whose scales depict mystic patterns, rune-like... codes of DNA giving clues of how the universe is put together, news from the source.... We would call that, Troutness... and then there are ladybugs... ladybugness... and rhinoseri... rhinosorusness... and then Mathematics, speaking of divine order... an order of heaven, of God, which we can glimpse in our differential equations and cosines and tangents here on earth... Gerard Manley Hopkins the early Modern British poet acclaimed that the world is charged with the grandeur of God, that in nature God's truth shimmers forth to be apprehended and known... that's Platonic thought... earth, heaven's talisman, earth the living breathing symbol of God.

Plato's opus, his chief work was the Republic (which he entitled (o Dike, on justice) is a prime example of this ethos. For Plato the Polis, or the city state, was a means to live on earth, the way it was ordered in heaven.... A means of justice reflective of God's just order... Cityness on earth was symbolic of cityness in heaven... and cityness in earth is mutual and democratic and just, and compassionate... the way it is in heaven.... Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as in heaven.... Platonic thought... that is the air that the writers of John's

gospel breathed... I promise this all has a point! At least you can impress your friends.

The writer in John's gospel tells us that Jesus and the Father are one... that Jesus is the word from heaven made flesh... so you can see the Platonic pattern, right... Jesus is the God become Man... the true human who represents Godness on earth... and this is a departure from the classic depiction of God as the unmoved mover, the changeless one... This is a God who is moved, who acts, who loves.... Jesus is touchstone, evidence of who God is... how God acts... He is Godness on earth... So to know Jesus, what do we know of God?... We know that God has a heart for those on the margins... sinners and tax collectors and prostitutes, are John's examples... We know that God is all about healing the sick... that God is all about feeding people who are hungry... that God washes the dirty feet of the ones he serves... that God prays for us as we make our way among the wiles of this world... and that God will suffer torture and death for this cause of goodness... that God will suffer for the sake of love.

And here's the thing... the lynchpin of this gospel... that for John, the figure of Jesus cannot be separated from the community that follows him... As the father and I are one, so too are you and I, my brothers and sisters... For John the community of the Jesus movement is one and the same as Jesus, the word come down from heaven... that the community of believers are to be Godness on earth.... Not by getting it all right... or adhering to a code of Dogma... but by being the people of God... being true to our humanity our Godness.... Our Godness that John calls the light of the world ... being true to our humanity by healing and feeding and washing feet, and welcoming the outcast... by living into our instincts of compassion and kindness and mercy... that we give our lives over even unto suffering if it is required... because that is the way God is, and that is the way we are made in God's image... that is Godness in earth... and that is the life into which we are baptized, immersed... dead to the way of sin and death, and alive to love and life.... We are not unmoved, sufficient unto ourselves, but our lives are the very process of love moving over the face of creation.

So know again, dear people of God, that when the bread is broken on the altar... and the wine is shared... that is our body and blood as well.... It is us, the people of God, blessed broken and given to the world... We are nurture, holy food and drink.... Signs in the flesh of God alive in earth, among the people God loves... As God is, so we are... and as we are, so God is.... We and our creator are one....Trust that ancient wisdom... and live as if it is true.