

GROWING UP IN OUR FAITH

Acts 1: 1-11; 1 Corinthians 13: 1-13

How many of us believed in Santa Claus when we were children? How many of us believed in fairy tales? How many of us believed our parents could do anything and take care of everything? And conversely, how many of us remember when we started questioning our parents and the things we believed when we were children? Growing up is not always easy. We discover the world is not as ordered and safe as we thought it was. People make mistakes. People do bad things. Things don't always go as we would like or as they should. We are not as protected, secure or in control as we imagine. Losing our innocence is not something pleasant or straightforward.

But would any of us question whether it is necessary to grow up? No we would not. Learning is not always fun, but it is necessary. Learning is not always pleasant, but it is important. Why? Because living in reality is better than living in fantasy land. Living in the truth is better than living a lie. Living in the truth is better because otherwise, when the truth does hit us, it will be less of a surprise and we will be better equipped.

But is growing up just a fearful thing? No. Growing up can actually be an awesome thing, a wonderful thing. Even though there is pain, hurt, disappointment and uncertainty with growing up, there is also depth and height to where we can go in relationships, in experiences of gratitude and in appreciating life for all its limitations. In fact, can we ever have richness in our love if we don't also face the vulnerability and sometimes pain that comes with it? Can we ever grow in love if we don't also pass through the risks, perils and sometimes disappointments of loving others? No.

And this is not only true to life in general. It is also true in our spiritual life. Do we still have the same beliefs we had as children? Do we still have the same certainties about God, heaven and why things happen the way they do? And if we have to give up some of those beliefs because we know how complicated life can be as we grow up, how does our faith grow to meet the realities we face and live as adults?

Here is where we have to listen to what scripture is telling us. And let's begin with the story of the Ascension in Acts. The first group of Christians were used to having Jesus right there with them, walking them by the hand. Developing faith without Jesus there to guide them was unthinkable. How would they be able to discern right from wrong, choose well and live well, find courage and the grace

to live as Christians in the face of troubles, challenges and losses? How would they hear God's voice and find Jesus' way in new situations?

Well, Jesus tells them that they will be given what they need to do so. He also tells them that when he is gone in the flesh he will still be with them as Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is Jesus with them, God in them. They have to grow up and let go of Jesus' hand. Like a child growing up, they have to now make their own decisions and chart their own path through life. They have to develop their own faith, with the Holy Spirit working in them, not get it ready made. And so, as they are gazing up toward heaven, two mysterious figures ask them why they are just standing there. Jesus will be back some day. But in the meantime, they've got to get on with it.

And what do they have to get on with exactly? This is where we can find guidance with our second reading from Corinthians. The apostle Paul is challenging Christians in that community to focus on what it means to follow Jesus for their time and place. Jesus preached love, taught them love and embodied what it means to live love even in the worst, most complicated and discouraging of circumstances. Love is what transforms.

But to figure out what love requires in every situation and relationship requires discernment and prayer. It's not easy and it's not straight forward. This is also why after he describes what love is, the apostle says: 'When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now, we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.'

Faith and hope are the spiritual qualities we need for the journey. Faith is not fact. Faith is not certainty. It is trust, trust that we will receive what we need for the journey, trust that God will be above us, Jesus beside us, and the Spirit within us. Hope is faith looking forward. Hope is openness to what will come, openness to trust that we will receive what we'll need to choose and live abundantly and well. But the actual substance of our faith and hope, the actual content is: love. Love is what must live in us and love is what must bind us to others and to this earth - Love and nothing else. What we believe and what we hope is that love will find us, live in us, inspire us and guide us through every situation we will have to face.

But let me be more specific. As children we depend on our parents to guide us, protect us and manage everything around us so that we are safe, secure and nurtured for life. But growing up is about discovering that our parents can't protect us forever, that life is full of uncertainty, vulnerability and realities we

cannot control. Sadly, however, our faith in God too often doesn't grow up. We're still attached to a faith in God as one who can and will protect us from everything and bless us with every advantage. And so, our motivations in our relationship with God, our faith and our prayers are all about what we can get out of God. Conversely, if we are afraid, we want to make sure we're right with God because if God is in charge and in control, we don't want God to be upset with us and punish us.

Sadly, too many people still have this kind of faith and this kind of conception of God. God is in control and that's comforting because we're not in control. God is in charge and that's comforting because we can't be in charge of so many factors in our lives that can make all the difference in our well-being and in the wellbeing of those we love. And you know, in many passages, especially in our older testament, this is the kind of faith that is visible on the surface. But the journey of Israel as it culminates in Jesus is that life in the world is full of uncertainty and peril, full of the valley of the shadow of death as the 23rd Psalm frames it. All the good that we can experience and do in life is experienced and done in the face of many things that can and too often do go wrong.

There are natural disasters, accidents, and sudden illnesses with no direct link to causes for which any one person is responsible. There is the intentional and unintentional cruelty of people who can and do hurt us. Being a Christian, having a relationship with God; it will not protect us anymore than not having a relationship with God. So then, some will think, why bother cultivating faith and hope in God and praying to God? **Because the path of redemption, salvation, abundance, purpose and peace is not in being protected, but in being transformed in the midst of life.**

God didn't protect Jesus from death, but resurrected him in the face of the worst kind of dying. Resurrection is not just a physical reality, but a spiritual reality. We pray not for protection as if some invisible hand will shield us from trouble, but for divine strength, new power to find love, purpose, fullness and peace even through bad stuff will happen. And sometimes, we need this moment by moment, especially when we're passing through the valley of the shadow of death and the pain runs deep.

We pray that we will find our way to compassion rather than indifference or hard-heartedness. We pray that we will find our way to forgiveness rather than holding a grudge or resenting, hating or carrying bitterness in our hearts. We pray for the courage and inspiration to change things in our lives and our world. We pray for peace of acceptance and the grace of gratitude even if there is no cure for our illness. We pray for the strength to let go and let be when reconciliation is not possible or others are not prepared to face the hurt they have caused. We pray for healing hoping that the divine energy of love in us

can heal in body, mind or spirit. I can go on all day describing the powerful ways the love of God must grow and transform us anew again and again as we face the challenges and opportunities of life.

We are not ultimately protected from the bad stuff. We are not in control. A grown up faith doesn't pray to God as if God controls everything. No. God will find us, heal us and transform us even though we must face our cross like everyone else, whatever that cross may be at any stage of our lives. But the kind of abundance we can experience inside, the kind of human beings we can become, the kind of gratitude, even joy we can taste, the kind of peace we can feel... that's where the power of God is infinite. That's the meaning of resurrection. We are not protected from death. We need to grow up and face that. But there is no kind of death through which God cannot resurrect us. That's the faith we need.

And the very circumstances of our dying become the seeds of the kind of resurrection we can experience. We are more sensitized and compassionate with those who have gone through what we've gone through. We can understand others better, love them better, and walk with them better because the very things we've suffered become the ingredients God uses in our experience of resurrection. And as we give to others in love, we continue to heal and grow in love ourselves. Do you see how it works?

God can do amazing things with us, in us, through us. We need to keep nurturing and cultivating our faith and hope. We need to keep growing in love. God can transform any pain and fear into new confidence, purpose and peace. Do you believe that?

Let us pray: Help us, O God, as we try to grow up in our faith... Give us clarity, vision and hope that you can do amazing things in us... Give us the kind of love that can fill us with joy, gratitude and peace, so that we can bless the world around us, crying out for healing... Amen.