

Homily January 2024

I don't know about you, but I have a mixed relationship with New Year's resolutions. There are a few resolutions that I have probably made every year of my entire adult life – lose weight, exercise regularly, pray every morning. I usually break at least one of my resolutions by the end of the first week, or certainly by the 14th. New Year's Day gives us an opportunity to start afresh. But it is also, let's be honest, just another day. We are who we are, December 31st or January 1st or January 14th. If – as is the case for me – you have too much of a sweet tooth, you follow the seafood diet (as in, if I see food, I eat it), or you look at the old adage, no pain, no gain, and wonder what's so bad about “no pain”, then massive changes are going to take more than a secret little vow.

Speaking of secret things, no, I am not going to talk about sexual morality like St. Paul. I truly believe that I have – and in fact, priests and rabbis and imams and homilists at large have - absolutely no business policing anyone's sexual behavior from the pulpit. Passages like this one are so often misused and misunderstood, and, frankly, part of why I've often struggled with St Paul. But even so, there are two general points in his epistle that I think any of us can relate to. Don't let any *thing* have power over you, and treat your body as a temple where the Holy Spirit lives. To keep to my New Year's resolutions as a theme – well, this year, these two points *are my resolutions*. Rather than, say, resolving that I am going to give up drinking alcohol, why not say instead, alcohol is a thing that can have power over people; I pray that it not have power over me. Same for chocolate, money, status, sex, addictions of any kind. If the Holy Spirit lives in me, if I can imagine that, maybe I'll stay away from the land of self-harm, or the realm of self-harming thought. And God will know. It isn't St. Paul keeping the score on our cosmic scorecard of sins vs. reparative justice and mercy. It is Jesus, it is God, it is the Holy Spirit. We have a Trinity of guardians.

After all, the Old Testament reading, the Psalm, and the Gospel all make one point above all else, and that is that God sees us, God knows our thoughts, knows our hearts, knows our actions. God knows before I do that I'm not going to lose any weight this year, I'll exercise about as much, or less, than the year before, and I'll pray – maybe – most mornings, but not with my whole heart. Maybe I'll drink a little less and eat more consciously while trying to remember not to let those things have power over me, but that is in God's hands. The psalmist, David, said it best, addressing his Lord, “You notice everything I do, and everywhere I go. Before I even speak a word, you know what I will say.... Nothing about me is hidden from you.”

And who among us cannot relate to the story of Samuel and Eli? I suppose when I was young I would have seen myself in Samuel, but at my age, most assuredly I'm closer to Eli. I can imagine being woken four times by my assistant, who would be there, ready to help, when I have not been the one calling him. I'm sure it would take me many more times than it took Eli before I would recognize that it was the Lord calling my assistant, and in the meantime, I'd be increasingly annoyed, irritated, and clipped in reply.

And, like Samuel and Eli, we too live in a time when “the Lord hardly ever speaks to people or appears in their dreams.” I know there are people who have had the Lord speak to them or visit them in dreams, but neither has happened to me, and my scientific mind would be unlikely to

recognize it if it happened. A lot of the people who claim these dreams or visions are sincere, I believe them, but there are so many false prophets and charlatans in our world that, as my folk singer inspiration for many months now, John Craigie, sings it, “my disbelief has been my greatest gift.” I certainly connect with Nathanael in John’s Gospel, who utters the biblical equivalent of trash-talking on the basketball court: “Can anything good come from Nazareth?” Nathanael surely seems to be thinking, ‘oh, yeah, right, the Messiah’s here, in my town, tell me another one.’ But then Jesus immediately hails him as a true descendant of our ancestor Israel – meaning Jacob, a ‘man who wrestled with God.’ Jesus knew where he’d been, under that fig tree. He knew what Nathanael had been thinking, but also how he had, in fact, been righteous and probably getting into good trouble, as John Lewis used to say. And he promised him “something even greater.”

If nothing about me is hidden from God, then clearly God knows all of my sins, my doubts, my fears, my perplexity, but also that I am, that we all are, redeemable, reparable and worthy of His mercy. This is such a time of woe, cataclysmic wars, rising seas, warming temperatures, increasingly violent and unpredictable storms, widespread politics of hate, and all of the unspeakable everyday tragedies of our little lives. Theologian Brian McLaren from the Center for Action and Contemplation speaks about four deep problems that we face: the crisis with our planet; the crisis of poverty and inequality; the crisis of peace; and the crisis of religion. That last one is both grand and small, about universal religions and about our own small hearts of faith. On December 30th, I attended the funeral in Norfolk of the 23 year-old brother of my associate director at Trinity College, Gabby Nelson. Avery Nelson was a passenger in a car over which the driver lost control and slammed into a tree, on Christmas day. I think God knows how I feel about this senseless death. Anger, grief, helplessness – there really are no words to cover the feeling wrestling with God around it. There is no making sense of tragedies like that.

We all will die. It is sad, no matter what. I think of our parishioners who have died in the last few years, many of them in their 90s, and we are still sad. I think about my former PhD student who lost her child after 15 hours alive; she named him Moses, I think because she knew, as a person of faith, that her child would lead the way to the promised land for her. But she is likely to be as sad about Moses’s death 11 years ago as she is of her mother’s death with Alzheimer’s a few years later. I think of my dear friend, Byron, with end-stage pancreatic cancer, at 62. We all go. And none of us really knows the hour or the day. There is only the belief of heaven and the pure light of the Universal Christ to welcome us. McLaren asks us to remember the rhythm of every day for Jesus in His time on earth: “withdraw for solitude, but then come back to engage by healing, feeding, caring, welcoming, binding up the wounds of this world, implanting in people a vision of resilience, engaging with the world on fire.” John Craigie sings, “don’t die with your eyes closed to the light – die with your eyes open”. Well, with my eyes open, what I see, more than anything, is that I am blind without Jesus. It is God who sees all. It is only through Him that any of us may hope to see “heaven open and God’s angels going up and coming down.”

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, oh God, my strength and my redeemer.