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 Epiphany A5
 Isaiah 58:1-9, I Cor 2:1-12, Matt 5:13-20

Clarity

Clarity – something we say we are looking for; something we say we need; something we say we want. How many times have you found yourself saying: *If only I had some clarity about this, I could ... (fill in the blank)* . We forget that clarity can also be a harsh master. Hearing clearly leaves little room for mistakes. Knowing clearly puts an end to excuses. Seeing clearly means there is nowhere to hide inconvenient truths. Well as I reflect on the scriptures today, I cannot help but sympathize with Paul, when he says to the Corinthians: *I come to you in weakness, fear, and with much trembling!*" (I Cor 2). That's because our scriptures today take, in turn: hearing, knowing, and seeing CLEARLY, and they leave little room for mistakes, excuses, or coverups. *This set of scriptures seems to be made for the days we are living through.*

To the people of ancient Israel, the Prophet Isaiah issues a stark warning: before we complain that God has not heard our prayers, best look to the ways WE have not heard the prayers of the oppressed, the hungry, and the homeless. Best to look at the way WE have neglected the needs of others, before bemoaning God's neglect of OUR needs. Now that is some CLARITY. Nothing clears up religious piety like a clear examination of our own motivations. It might be painful to look at the truth about ourselves, or as Isaiah says: *Look, you serve your own interests...* (Is. 58). Ouch!

To his community, Matthew minces no words in teaching that their faith is of no use whatsoever, if it does not serve and illuminate the world around them. Their purpose is to be SALT, which symbolizes seasoning, substance, and purification. Their purpose is to be LIGHT, which does not draw attention to itself, but illuminates things as THEY are, not as we WISH them to be. Service and clarity cannot be simply personal and

private. Following Christ is a communal, public kind of clarity. It is what we do together as a church. Christ sees and fulfills everything about the Law and the Prophets because HIS justice EXCEEDS our laws. This is what Matthew means when he says: *Unless YOUR justice exceeds that of the scribes, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven.* (Matt 5) This is bold clarity indeed. Matthew encourages us to take our faith *outside* these four walls. If we do not do that, it illuminates NOTHING for anyone, not even ourselves.

It is Paul, however, who defines faith with such CLARITY, when he says to them: *"When I came to you ... I proclaimed ... NOTHING ... except Jesus Christ ... crucified ... so that your faith might rest NOT on human wisdom, but on the power of God."* (1Cor 2). Paul is saying that THE defining element, which provides COHERENCE to our faith, is the mutual experience of SUFFERING. We share that experience not only with each other, but because of Jesus we share that suffering WITH GOD. In the state-sponsored murder of Jesus of Nazareth, God shared our suffering, and his mercy.

The entire corpus of Christian theology, the CORE of the Gospel, revolves around the public execution of a man whose whole life was love. HE was salt of the earth. It was *our* justice that ground him into dust. HE was light for the world. It was *our* truth that snuffed him out. But that was not the end of his story. He would not remain dust, and he would not remain snuffed! Because he was not only human – he was also GOD. And THIS, my friends, made the story of his execution even more offensive, or just plain nonsense, to Paul's contemporaries. The idea that God suffers with us, that God could be touched by our injustice, cruelty, and death – this was just TOO MUCH for ancient Greeks and Jews. It's still too much for some people even today. The crucified Christ (which is simply another way of saying the 'executed God') IS an offensive idea to anyone who thinks God's power and truth are like the kind we see around us, only writ-large! No. Christ-Crucified is a challenge, an affront.

Christ crucified shines the glaring and bright light of God on the kind of power we are used to, and the lies we tell. In the execution of Jesus we can see clearly the motivations and methods of an empire built on killing. As Paul says, "*The Spirit searches EVERYTHING, EVEN THE DEPTHS OF GOD!*" ... and I would add: even the depths of human suffering. The cross is the great equalizer not only between us and our neighbors, but also between us and God – and increasingly these crosses are being erected all around us these days. This can mean only one thing: with every new cross, the Spirit of God is hard at work searching OUR hearts.

Deep in the heart of our neighbor, deep in the heart of ourselves, and deep in the heart of God, there is the shared reality of pain. It is AT THAT POINT of shared pain, and only at that point, where we and God BOTH suffer and die ... it is there that the Divine Physician can bring healing and resurrection. It is at that point of shared suffering, and only at that point, that Christ sets us free to know clearly what power and justice REALLY are. THAT is clarity. And also: therein lies the beginning of resurrection, and new life.

References

New Interpreters Bible, Volume VI, pp. 498-503.
Volume X, pp. 816-818.
Volume VIII, pp. 181-188.