

Fifth Sunday of Lent – March 22, 2015

In the interest of full disclosure, I have to confess that today's second reading, that snippet from the Letter to the Hebrews (5:7-9) is a favorite passage of mine. I used this reading at my father's funeral 30 years ago. My father dies of pancreatic cancer and literally wasted away to a small shell of himself. He was a pretty good guy, all in all, but was transformed by his suffering. He learned obedience from what he suffered and it was astonishing to see.

Today's second reading gives us a picture of Jesus we may not be accustomed to seeing. The constant teaching of the Church is that Jesus is fully divine and fully human. Perhaps it's easier for us to grasp that Jesus is fully divine. He's the Son of God, the second person of the Blessed Trinity. It's less easy to understand that Jesus was fully human, like us in all things but sin. Here's why.

There's a heresy called Docetism that's almost as ancient as the Church is ancient. This heresy proclaims that Jesus' humanity was swallowed up by his divinity. In effect, it means that Jesus was only play-acting as a human being, something like an adult pretending to participate in a doll's tea party. Like most heresies, Docetism means well. But it fails to appreciate the astonishing condescension of God who has created human nature precisely to receive divine nature.

To prompt our reflection, let's ask ourselves if we can affirm that Jesus shuddered before the Mystery of evil and went to his death in darkness. If we hesitate giving an affirmative answer to such a question perhaps we need a deeper appreciation of the full humanity of Christ.

He is a man like us in all things but sin. Jesus is born of Mary, grows up without much notice in Nazareth, is baptized by John, prays to God, gathers disciples, preaches the Good News, heals the sick, exorcises demons, remains faithful to his mission, runs afoul of religious and political authorities, and is executed by crucifixion. He knew the full range of human emotions, including joy in the beauty of God's creation, frustration with his disciples, anger in the temple, anxiety and aloneness in the garden, and abandonment on the cross. As the gospel of Luke tells us, Jesus grew in wisdom, age, and grace, suggesting development in the consciousness of his identity and mission. Jesus met with failure, desertion, and betrayal. He did not seek suffering but accepted it as the byproduct of being faithful to who he was. Despite his feeling of abandonment, Jesus freely handed himself over to the Father. As such, Jesus is the best that the human race can produce.

Why is all this important? Simplest answer? We want to know enough about Jesus of Nazareth to bet our lives on him. We want to know that our humanity has such dignity that it is possible for God to live in it, act through it, and become perfected in it.