

## WHAT KIND OF GOD AM I LOOKING FOR?

On Friday I got together with four priest friends who are part of the same Priest Prayer Group for 48 years. Over those years we have probably had up to twenty other priests gather with us for a time but then for one reason or another they stopped. We are part of the Lord's walking wounded now. One priest has only one working kidney and that was a transplant a dozen years ago. Another has pancreatic cancer but is holding his own, a third has multiple sclerosis and the fourth is scheduled next month for open heart valve replacement surgery. My time dealing on and off with diabetes is the least significant health issue of the bunch.

We gather once a month, we bring each other up to date with our personal situations, we speak of what we hear is happening in various parts of the diocese. One of the priests is my confessor and so we always celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation. We conclude our meeting with Evening Prayer together and then grab a bite to eat before heading back to our respective Rectories. There is always an assigned article or passage from a book or a part of a CD for us to discuss and share on. On Friday it was a passage from a CD by a Sister, a Religious woman theologian, and it was entitled "Into the depths of darkness: the humility of the cross."

Her point was that the cross was not simply the actual denouement of Jesus' life as if he could also have died of old age or from cancer. Specifically the cross was part of the Divine Plan of salvation, not an accidental motif in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. The Father knew about the cross, knew all about the cross, enough to be able to ask his beloved Son to embrace that cross and all that it meant and all that it enfolded.

The cross is central to the triumph of Christ's love. And yet, we often shun the cross, hate the shadow of the cross when it falls upon our lives. We pray to be set free of the cross. We flee the cross. Even though we see what embracing the cross accomplished in Jesus. Our culture hates the cross even as it uses various means to "nail" people in public ways and to affix certain people to certain activities or philosophies or actions with a decided desire to destroy the person or the person's reputation. Crucifixions have not ended. They have grown more sophisticated and high tech. The cross was not only real back then. It is real now.

One of the priests said that in his own life he has gone through several phases regarding his identity. As a young man in college the question was:

"Who am I?" The question is that of personal identity. As he moved out into public life he found himself asking the same inter-relational question that Jesus asked:

"Who do people say that I am?" Who do others think I am?

Then the question shifted, even though he was a priest, he asked:

"Whose am I?" The whole question of love and being beloved had to be grappled with.

His fourth question is a little more complicated, it is this:

“Who do I say you are because of who I am right here and right now?” The question combines personal love and lived truth.

The fifth question is not a question. It is a statement:

“I am.” Just as it was for Jesus. And it takes different forms. I am the Way. I am the Good Shepherd. I am the Bread of Life. I am the Truth. I am the Life. I am the Resurrection.

But in each of these identity questions there is a component of the cross involved. We cannot live our lives looking for a God whose primary responsibility is somehow to prevent bad things from happening to us. God takes the initiative in Christ. God steps out in love. God trusts even when his stepping out in trust is abused. God continues to hope even when we do not always respond to his hope or his grace. That is the meaning of the cross. The cross was counter-intuitive once upon a time but not now. Not since Jesus of Nazareth was nailed to it and died on it but rose from the tomb after it.

One of the reasons we use crucifixes in the Catholic tradition is that we believe it vitally important to depict him nailed to the cross. It means we always know where we can find him. It means that at whatever stage of life, whatever our personal quests are we know where he is and we know what he did and we know what he stands for. His cross establishes forever HIS ABIDING PRESENCE. So do not let your hearts be troubled. Even when the cross shows itself. Especially when the cross shows itself. It means HE IS NEAR. VERY NEAR.

May the Lord bless us today and give us his peace.