

Sacred Heart Novena - 31 May to 8 June 2018

HE LOVED WITH A HUMAN HEART

Day 2: Friday, 01 June, 8th week in Ordinary Time – God’s essence is Mercy

Reading: 1Pet 4:7-13; Responsorial Psalm: Ps 96; Gospel: Mark 11:11-26

Welcome to day 2 of our Novena. Yesterday, we met Jesus in the womb of Mary and we REJOICED because GOD IS WITH US as LOVE MADE FLESH.

Today our words are **HUNGER – ANGER – MERCY**

In our Gospel today we meet yesterday’s baby in Mary’s womb, now a fully grown man. He has just entered Jerusalem, triumphantly, amidst the people’s shouts of Hosanna! What happens the next day is very “curious”, at least for me. Today’s gospel says “The next day, as they were leaving Bethany, he was hungry.”

HUNGER

Last February, I was in a very remote area in South Sudan. The place is called Mapuordit and we have two Australian sisters missioned there (both are in their 70s), Sisters Rita and Wendy. One of the many things our sisters are involved in is food distribution. Sr Rita said to me “it is important that the people have food because when people are hungry, they get angry and violence explodes in the community.”

Why was he hungry? Why did he not eat before leaving Bethany? Then the story continues and it becomes even more unbelievable. Jesus looks for fruits on a fig tree outside the season of figs. And in his hunger, he curses the poor fig tree and the next day the fig tree is withered to its roots!

ANGER

Jesus in today’s gospel episode reminds me of the people in Mapuordit – when they are hungry, they get angry! Sandwiched in the story of the fig tree and the hungry Jesus is the episode of the cleansing of the temple. Here we see the anger of Jesus in full swing “...on entering the temple area, he began to drive out those selling and buying there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who were selling doves.” What picture of Jesus do we see in today’s Gospel? A snapshot of him, hungry and angry!

And this hungry, angry Jesus, at the end of the gospel, tells us to forgive. Yes, he says “Forgive whatever you have against anybody, so that your father in heaven may forgive your failings too.” (verse 26) In his hunger and anger, he tells us, forgive. How do we make sense of this? This brings us to our third word for the day...

MERCY

In the Old Testament, the prophet Hosea prophesies not with his words but with his life, his very person. In Hosea, God is presented as an aggrieved husband whose wife has become a harlot. God’s people have broken the covenant and therefore, in anger, God has also broken with his people and has decided to show them no mercy. In Hosea 1:6 we hear the Lord say

“I no longer feel pity for the house of Israel; rather, I abhor them utterly.” The Lord further says in verse 9 “...You will not be my people and I will not be your God.” Very much like the Jesus we see in today’s Gospel, the God we meet in the beginning of the book of Hosea is an angry God. Yet Cardinal Walter Kasper says that in Hosea “*we find the high point of the Old Testament’s revelation of God’s mercy.*” (*Mercy*, 50) How?

The dramatic turn comes in Hosea 11:8, where God says “How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel?...MY HEART RECOILS WITHIN ME.” - Cardinal Kasper calls this God’s decisive statement ...God turns his justice upside down, he throws it out, so to speak...Why? God’s compassion flares up and God decides not to execute his blazing wrath. Mercy is victorious over justice in God.

Why did God do this? Let us read Hosea 11:8-9. “My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; FOR I AM GOD and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath.” *This deeply moving passage shows that God, already in the Old Testament...is a God who has a heart, which flares up in anger, but which then literally overturns itself out of mercy...God reveals himself as being completely other than mortal. He reveals himself as the Holy One.. The constitution of his essence, which fundamentally distinguishes him from human beings and elevates him above everything mortal is his MERCY...Mercy is God’s very essence.*

Jesus, reveals the Father to us. He has a heart that can flare up in anger as we saw in today’s Gospel story. Yet, like the Father, his heart recoils within him, and instead of revenge, his response is mercy, instead of punishing, he forgives. Hunger – anger- mercy, the last word is mercy!

Later in this Mass, Father will say “*By the mystery of this water and wine may we come to share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in our humanity.*” He loved with a human heart. His heart, like our hearts, flares up in anger in some situations. But since he took on our humanity, he also shares with us his divinity. Our hearts, like his’, like the Father’s, can also recoil within us and have mercy. Sisters and brothers, we share in God’s holy essence, we too can be the face of God’s mercy.

Back in Mapuordit in South Sudan, when I asked Sr Wendy why she volunteered to be on mission there (this year is her 17th year in the mission), she said “Being in Mapuordit is like walking into the gospels. We encounter...daily...the very people Jesus touched, healed and loved...the hungry, the poor, the blind, the lepers”....to the hungry, poor, blind, lepers of Mapuordit, Sr Wendy is one of the faces of God’s mercy.

We are not in South Sudan but our call is the same. In our homes, in our work places, out in the streets, may we be, to each other, faces of God’s mercy.