

28th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Fathers of the 2nd Council of Nicaea 2013

Timothy Radcliffe begins his book, *Why Go to Church*, with following story: One Sunday a mother shook her son awake, telling him it was time to go to church. No effect. Ten minutes later she was back: ‘Get out of bed immediately and go to church.’ “Mother, I don’t want to. It’s so boring! Why should I bother?” “For two reasons”, his mother said, “First, you know you *must* go to church on a Sunday; it’s a day of obligation. And secondly, because you’re the bishop!”

It’s not only bishops, Radcliffe points out with a rather smooth irony, who sometimes feel no desire to go to church. Surveys show that a high percentage of people in the West believe in God. . . at least in the abstract. . . . but attendance at Sunday services have plummeted over the past decades. People are in some ways more interested in “spirituality” than in what is perceived as “institutional” religion. Once we have faced this current dichotomy, we are still left with a huge question: and what about “God”? Where does “God” fit into this conflict between “spirituality” and “institutional” religion?

[Roman: Is our experience now so radically different from that of Naaman the Syrian who, in today’s Old Testament reading, vowed that he would “*no longer offer holocaust or sacrifice to any other god except to the LORD*” that his words no longer even make sense to us.] **[Byzantine: What does it mean for us to receive the “Word of God” and to know the “secrets of the Kingdom of God”? What bearing does this have on this conflict, if any?]**

To help us think about this problem- about what to do with this contemporary conflict between spirituality and institutional religion- I would like to turn, first of all, to a great 20th-century Jewish theologian, Abraham Heschel. Heschel, who died in 1972, was well aware that we are currently living through one of the great hours of history. The false gods- the idols that we have often inadvertently created even within our religious communities- are crumbling, religious institutions have been hit with a tsunami of doubt in one way or another, but the hearts of people are still hungry, hungry for the voice of God even when they don't know what they are hungry for.

And here, I think, we can begin to see the truth of that separation between spirituality and institution. The voice of God, for many reasons, has been stifled, and people know that something is wrong, and we don't quite know what to do about. But you can see the hunger so clearly in the widespread positive, even joyful, reaction, both inside and outside the church, to Pope Francis and what he says. People long to hear a word that is life-giving and compelling and welcoming.

To recapture the echo, to hear once again "the voice", the "word", that word which can somehow give us access, as Jesus tells his disciples, to the "secrets of the Kingdom of God", we must be honest in our willingness to listen. But *how* do we begin to listen again, afresh, after so many years? Centuries ago, the writer of the psalms made a very bold claim when he wrote: "*The LORD has made his salvation known: in the sight of the nations he has revealed his justice.*" "*All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation by our God.*" And because of this, he could then say "*Sing to the LORD a new song,*" and "*Sing joyfully to the LORD, all you lands: break into song; sing praise.*" But it is this very thing, I think, that we remain doubtful about- has God done anything? Is

there anything for which we can and ought to sing and give thanks? Or are we left with only ourselves- our thoughts, our feelings, our experiences- and so we are left with what is fundamentally a spirituality of *ourselves*? This, I think, is what lies at the heart of the separation between spirituality and religion. Many people for many reasons- some good, some not so good- no longer have confidence that the religious institutions and religious community life can mediate anything that we can't find already in and by ourselves.

So, how do we get through this separation, this bifurcation? How do we hear what people are legitimately saying when they ask the question, like the bishop in my opening story, "why should I bother get up on Sunday morning? Why should I bother with institutional religion at all?" How do we go to that place and, in the words of Pope Francis, "accompany people", but not get stuck there ourselves in the separation and the darkness? Heschel, the Jewish theologian, gives us a terribly simple, but, I think, absolutely vital starting point for answering this question and for beginning to overcome the separation between spirituality and institution.

We begin, he says, not with ourselves but with God. "God", he says, "is of *no importance* unless He is of *supreme importance*". Let me repeat that: "God is *no importance* unless God is of *supreme importance*". In other words, if we treat God as if God were somehow a nice commodity, or an insurance policy for when we die, or a heavenly policeman to teach the kids to be good and to keep things in order when we need order in society, or what makes me feel good about myself, that is, if we treat God as a *means to an end*, with that end being something *other than* God, then eventually God will become unimportant to us.

Religion, at least authentic religion, is not, Heschel argues, about *expediency*. It is not about how best to *use God* to serve our own personal interests, to serve ourselves. Just pause for a moment and think about how often you might have used religion in that way. I know that I certainly have. I have often treated God and religion as a means to some end other than God.

This simple point has tremendous significance when it comes to the question with which I began- why should I or anyone get up out of bed on Sunday morning to come to church? To pray, to praise, and to bless the name of God- that's the Jewish answer, and it's also the Christian answer. We come to turn towards, face, and worship the living God. Liturgy is not, first of all, about us; it certainly does something for us and to us, but it's first of all about God. And even when we say that theoretically, abstractly, we often treat what we do in liturgy as about us- whether it pleases us, whether it satisfies our tastes, our feelings, our sensibilities.

"Know before whom you stand," Heschel says. *Know before whom you stand.*" This, I think, gets to the heart of our problem. When I pray, when I celebrate the Eucharist, when I engage in liturgy, do I know before I am standing? The truth is, I think, that I often act to myself as if I am standing before myself, not standing before the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, not standing before the living God who has shown us his face and his character in Jesus.

To pray and to bless the name of God, for both Jews and Christians, is the primary and the absolutely necessary way for us to understand who we are, what this world means, and who God is. "To live without prayer is to live without God," Heschel says, it is "to live

without a soul". "No one is able to think" about God unless he or she has "learned how to pray" to God, because prayer is the way we learn to think about the true God- the God of Israel, the God whom we meet in Jesus. Prayer and worship have the power to generate insight. It can give us understanding and wisdom not attainable by speculative or abstract thinking. Some of our deepest insights, decisions and attitudes can be born in moments of prayer and worship.

To know before whom we stand when we gather at this Ambo and at this Table and when we pray in quiet by ourselves, that is a knowledge that is not easily won. It is not automatic and it is not magic. What marks the act of prayer and worship and separates it from simply reading or studying a text is *the decision on our part to enter and face the presence of God*. It is the art of becoming *aware of God*. And when that happens, our worship *expands the presence of God in this world*. God is transcendent, totally other, different from everything we know in this world, but our worship makes God present. In this sense, God needs us. His being present, in a sense, depends of us, because when we bless God's name, God's glory touches this piece of his creation.

That's what we practice every time we gather together. We are practicing the art of entering and facing the presence of God *so that we can become aware of the presence of God in our lives and so that God's glory can touch at least this little corner of the world*. Without this conscious decision to enter and face the presence of God, our worship, our liturgy, our prayer, is either sterile or empty or is simply about us. When religious institutions are functioning well, they can lead us to that place of awareness. When they are not. . . . well. . . we may not know why it's worth getting up on Sunday mornings to be here.