

Nineteenth Sunday of the Year, cycle C

In our reading from the eleventh chapter of the Letter to the Hebrews we heard parts of what is certainly one of the most eloquent parts of the entire Bible, a lofty recounting of the faith of many of the great figures of the Old Testament. This morning's verses centered on Abraham and Sarah, but earlier ones speak of the faith of Abel and Noah, and later ones of Moses, Rahab, David, Samuel, and others whom the author of the letter calls "a great cloud of witnesses." It is especially fitting to reflect on this reading today, not simply because we are in what Pope Benedict declared a "Year of Faith" but also because it is the theme of Pope Francis's first encyclical, *Lumen Fidei*, "the light of faith." Pope Francis frankly and humbly admitted that the encyclical is the work of four hands—those of Benedict as well as his own, and it is relatively easy to spot parts that were originally from Benedict, such as the quotations from Friedrich Nietzsche, Fyodor Dostoevski, and Ludwig Wittgenstein. The end result is, nevertheless, a nicely unified and well-integrated whole which I think every one of you would do well to read. All I want to do this morning is single out two passages that have considerable practical importance and relate them to some points made in a book that is said to have had a more profound impact on our intellectual and spiritual lives than any other work in our generation, Scott Peck's *The Road Less Traveled*, a book that remained on the *New York Times* best-seller list for an astounding ten years and has been translated into 23 languages.

The first passage from the encyclical goes as follows:

When Moses is speaking to God on Sinai, the people cannot bear the mystery of God's hiddenness; they cannot endure the time of waiting to see his face [and so they begin worshipping an idol. But] faith by its very nature demands renouncing the immediate possession that sight would appear to offer; it is an invitation to turn to the source of the light while respecting the mystery of a countenance that will unveil itself personally in its own good time. (no. 13)

In terms of Scott Peck's famous book, those Israelites were not up to the challenge of "delayed gratification," and yet this is one of the most important disciplines anyone could ever develop in order to lead a fruitful and productive life, and this is just as true of the strictly religious part of our lives as of any other part. As St. Paul writes in his second letter to the Corinthians, in this life "we walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Cor 5:7), and there is something definitely demanding about this. In fact, it is a kind of martyrdom, so much so that non-religious persons may consider it downright preposterous. It's not that faith is utterly irrational, for we can indeed give a reasoned defense of our faith, but it could never possibly be as clear and self-evident as $2 + 2 = 4$, and for this reason we may indeed be tempted, like the ancient Israelites, to set up one or another kind of idol in place of our dedication to an all-loving but nevertheless hidden God. May the cloud of witnesses who have gone before us—not just the Old Testament figures named in the Letter to the Hebrew but also the many holy men and women who have graced the Christian tradition for two millennia—inspire and strengthen us as we journey toward the kingdom where all of them already rejoice.

Somewhat related to what I have said already is another powerful passage from the new encyclical, this one from its final chapter. There, Pope Francis writes:

Faith is not a light that scatters all our darkness but a lamp that guides our steps in the night and suffices for the journey. To those who suffer, God does not provide arguments that explain everything; rather, his response is that of an accompanying presence, a history of goodness that touches every story of suffering and opens up a ray of light. (no. 57)

Here, too, I find a remarkable convergence with a passage from *The Road Less Traveled*. As you probably know, one of Scott Peck's main concerns was the way children are raised, for if they do not have in early life an assurance of being genuinely loved and valued by their parents, it will be extremely difficult for them to arrive at a healthy sense of self-worth that could see them through the inevitable turmoil of later life. Just as Pope Francis writes of God's being an "accompanying presence ... that touches the very story of [our] suffering," so too will a truly loving mother or father be such a presence. Dr. Peck writes:

In taking time to observe and to think about their children's needs, loving parents will frequently agonize over the decisions to be made and will, in a very real sense, suffer along with their children. The children are not blind to this. They perceive it when their

parents are willing to suffer with them, and although they may not respond with immediate gratitude, they will learn also to suffer. “If my parents are willing to suffer with me,” they will tell themselves, “then suffering must not be so bad, and I should be willing to suffer with myself.” This [Peck concludes] is the beginning of self-discipline.¹

I don’t know how many of you may have children still living at home, where such accompaniment may be most readily attainable, but even apart from the world of parenting, we can all learn something from this part of the encyclical and the similar reflections of Scott Peck, for in one way or another all of us have multiple opportunities to accompany others in their suffering, even as we often need such accompaniment ourselves. The life of faith is never simply a matter of “me and God,” but rather of our being part of a wide, indeed a worldwide, community, all of whose members are in some degree called to be responsible for one another. This may be most obvious for those in the so-called helping professions, but there will be many opportunities for any of us to show our love for others by standing with them in their times of need, just as we monks at St. Anselm’s are going to be called to do in the coming days for a woman who is even now driving down from New York to grieve her brother, a homeless man who committed suicide on our property a few days ago. As Pope Francis writes in *Lumen Fidei*, “Faith transforms the whole person precisely to the extent that he or she becomes open to love” (no. 26). May our fellowship this morning, our communion in the sacramental body and blood of Christ, nourish our own faith, deepen our love, and make firm the hope that one day we, too, will be part of that cloud of witnesses that goes all the way back to Moses, Abraham, and Abel.

¹ M. Scott Peck, M.D., *The Road Less Traveled: A New Psychology of Love, Traditional Values and Spiritual Growth*, 25th Anniversary Edition (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), 23.