

Homily for the 18<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time, A, August 3, 2014 (#113)

Two months ago, on Pentecost Sunday, I discussed the Holy Spirit under the symbol of fire, recalling the tongues of flame with which he descended upon the apostles that day in the Upper Room. Today our first reading presents us with the symbol of water, another time-honored image of God that we can similarly note in several aspects. As we heard from Isaiah, the Lord tells us, “All you who are thirsty, come to the water!” and continues by adding, “Come, without paying and without cost, drink wine and milk.” Thus do we have three quite different edible liquids present, each of which can represent one of the properties of water, and by comparison one of the properties of God. So what are they?

First of all, water is used for cleansing, which can be seen in its own way as a form of destruction. It is this symbolism that is present especially in baptism, as the new Christian’s soul, conceived in original sin, is washed clean, the way soapy water attacks and destroys dirt and grime, and the way the waters of the Red Sea destroyed the Egyptian army during the Exodus, thus liberating Israel from slavery to its ruler, Pharaoh, representing the devil. Saint Paul presents us with a list of potentially negative realities, including trial, distress and persecution, along with fallen angels, that may attack us in this life. If we are willing to submerge ourselves into that infinite ocean that is God, from baptism onward, then these angry bees may accost us, but they will be forced to remain on the surface, and so will not be able to affect our souls negatively.

However, once we are cleansed of filth, we need to be clothed in virtue, symbolized by the white garment received at baptism. Well, we now arrive at the second property of water: its capacity to make things grow, as on a farm or in a garden. If what does not belong there is washed away –or, to stay with the earlier image of fire, burned away, as in weeds and thorn bushes – then there is a sort of vacuum remaining, in which space good things can potentially grow. God plants the seeds of the virtues in our souls at baptism, but they need to be watered by grace to sprout and push above the soil. When that process occurs over time, then the seeds become green plants that then blossom into a variety of beautiful colors, of fructify into many tasty fruits, thus nourishing not only our own souls, but the lives of those around us as well, a real spiritual bumper crop. This sort of largesse is reflected in our gospel reading today, where Jesus feeds a large crowd with just a handful of loaves and fishes, showing not only God’s compassion, but his power and generosity as well. Here the symbolism of milk comes in, which not only quenches our thirst, but nourishes us with tasty protein, calcium and lactose as well.

Finally, once the grounds are cleansed, and then planted with good seed that makes the area attractive to the eye, fragrant with scent, pleasing to the ear with water flowing and birds singing, with tastes satisfied by fruits, and the gentle touches of breeze and shade or sun, then what is there left to do? The third property of water comes into play here: simply to have fun. After all, what is more enjoyable than a lot of water, be it in a pool, a river, a lake or the ocean? Whether you like swimming, fishing, boating, or just sitting on the sand and listening to the surf, or walking through the woods on a softly raining day, water invites us to relax and play. That third reality is reflected in the fact that the 5000 persons in the gospel were not simply fed, but “had their fill”; and in the fact that Isaiah mentions wine, which is water with added factors that move us to a sober exhilaration. Of course, too much of any good thing can be bad for us, as with water

flooding, or the diseases that result from poor eating habits. However, in moderation, wine or other intoxicants can contribute to our enjoying the company of family and friends, so that even Jesus used wine as part of the sacred meal that we call the Eucharist, with brother and sister believers around the communion table, so happy that we are singing together as at a family gathering for the holidays.

And really, isn't that why we enjoy picnics and barbecues so much? Yes, there is the food aspect, being nourished by the various goodies that people bring and provide. There is the fact that the fellowship among loved ones reflects how selfishness has been washed away and people are focused on helping each-other, as with the cooking, and decorating, and even the cleaning-up afterward. And, of course, a nicely-landscaped backyard can add to the overall enjoyment, as at a Fourth of July celebration, or a house full of delectable smells on Thanksgiving Day, or the sight and scent of the tree festooned with decorations as it hovers over the Christmas gifts. Thus, we have the preparation reflected in water's property of cleansing; the nourishment of the body through the food provided, grown with water at some point in its development; and the good-old-fashioned fun that results when people get together in an attractive environment and share their lives for a few hours, with the social lubrication provided by the fruit of the vine.

And, after all, while water is a Biblical image for God, we are also told in the Old Testament that one form of blessing is having one's steps bathed, not in water, but in milk; while Our Lord himself turned mere water into choice wine at Cana. This fact may often be overlooked by believers and nonbelievers alike, but it is true nonetheless: that God wants to send his graces to us so that we not only are free from sin, and then grown in virtue, but have a nice time, not only in heaven in the future, but on earth right now. True, life is not an unending party, since work needs to be done to provide the goodies in the first place. Still, ideally, work is both sufficient for family support, and personally fulfilling, so that one not only makes a contribution to society, but feels happy doing so, until the whistle blows at the end of the workday and another sort of fun commences, as we join loved ones in the holy leisure that is domestic life. Indeed, these three aspects of water not only complement each-other, but contrast with each-other, so that, by not being stuck in always working, or always playing, we come to enjoy both better, and look forward to them as natural alternating patterns in life, knowing that we are not only building God's Kingdom of justice down here, but are constructing our own eternal mansions up there.

May water, then, in the many ways we utilize it during our day and throughout our lives, from brushing our teeth to traveling to the beach, remind us that God is perpetually inviting us to dive more deeply into the boundless ocean that is he himself. And if we keep alternating our time between prayer in the water, and activity on the beach, then we will eventually, like the saints, transform into amphibians who are completely at home in both, and so bring together the life of the disciple with that of the apostle, as we clear the ground of our planet for good things to grow, so that all can share in the bounty, accompanied by everything from quiet intimacy with a loved one, to boisterous fun with a group of friends.