

22 March, 2009
Num 21:4-9; Ps 107:1-3, 17-22
Eph 2:1-10; John 3:14-21

Rev. Deborah Meister

Five centuries before the birth of Christ, the Greek philosopher Plato told a story to illustrate the condition of humankind. "Imagine," he has Socrates say, "men dwelling in a cave with a long entrance to the light on its entire width." (Plato, Republic, VII, 514.) Imagine that they have been fettered from the time they were born, so that they are able to look only at the rear wall of the cave, and to discern the things of the outside world only by the means of the shadows that those things cast upon the walls of cave when they pass by the opening. Would they not think, asked Socrates, that those shadows were the things themselves, and that, in naming them, they were describing reality itself, even if the things whose shadows they saw were themselves artificial, like puppets or toys? Glaucon, to whom he is speaking, concedes that they would. Having no access to what was real, they would be content with fantasy, assuming that it had substance.

"And consider this also," Socrates continued. If a person had been freed from the cave and led into the light of the sun, if he had endured the pain which light would bring upon his eyes, which were accustomed to darkness, if he learned what was real, if he were able to see the sun, and "if such a one should go down again and take his old place...would he not provoke laughter...and if it were possible [for the men in the cave] to lay hands on and to kill the man who tried to release them and lead them up, would they not kill him?" (Ibid, VII, 516) "They certainly would," Glaucon replied.

They certainly would, demonstrates Christ. "This is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light." (John 3:19) We come today to some of the most familiar and most troubling words in the Gospels. In a few sentences, John cuts to heart of the salvation story: that God loved us enough to send us Jesus, and we tried to destroy him. It is the story of people so attached to their own delusions that they destroy the one who could bring them into all truth.

The Hebrews in today's reading from Numbers are the very image of such a lost people. Wandering in the desert between bondage and freedom, they "[become] impatient on the way." (Num 21:4) Rebelling against God and against Moses, they cry out, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food¹." (Num 21:5) Now I have been lost in the wilderness, for a whole hour, and it was a frightening thing, but these were no ordinary wanderers. These were the same people who had seen the Ten Plagues in Egypt, who had fled through the Red Sea on dry land, who had received the Ten Commandments at Mount Horeb, whom God accompanied personally in the form of a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, people who ate daily of manna from heaven, people whose lives were drenched in miracles -- and yet, they were afraid. Their own bodily cravings and their memories of hard times overpowered their gratitude, their reason, and the evidence of their experience; they preferred the illusion of scarcity and danger to the proven reality of abundance and safety. They simply could not imagine a world which was not dominated by death. They clung to their shadows, and refused to look at the light, and would not leave their cave.

And so God, in God's mercy, did a strange and wonderful thing: she came to join them. God entered into our place of confusion and fear and death, and bore witness that these things, which seemed to be so true to us, were no more than passing shadows. Christ pointed us toward a sunlit world of trust, plenty, goodness, laughter, and kindness, a world where the broken would be restored, the sick made well, divisions overcome, and all flesh -- all flesh! -- would see God together.

¹ "This miserable food" is actually the manna!

Christ testified that he had been there, that goodness, and not suffering, would endure for eternity, that God, and not evil, held the universe in God's hand. But men and women would not believe. "They loved darkness" -- the darkness of their own fear -- "more than light," and so they gathered together every force that Christ said was a passing thing, and used their weight to crush him.

Oh, it is easy to condemn the ancient Hebrews, to point fingers and find humor in their plight, and it is easy to condemn the people who lived at the time of Jesus, but their lives look remarkably like our own. Even in this time of economic hardship, we live amid the greatest plenty the world has ever known, our supermarkets heaped with produce and a deli on every corner -- and yet we fear having too little. Having received the gift of freedom, we use it for paltry ends or become impatient on the way rather than daring to achieve dreams that might be worthy of the children of God. Knowing the immeasurable love of God given to us in Jesus Christ, we insist on behaving as if God were an angry God; we fear the very God who redeems us. Nourished each week upon the manna of the Body and Blood of Christ, we allow our faith to be cold and weak. Everything around us shouts that God is good -- the beauty of nature, the friends who love us and whom we love, the challenges through which we grow, the very air we breathe -- and yet, we turn away from the pillar of fire and nurture our fears, our doubts, our illusions. We, too, live in shadows, and we struggle to believe in the One who gives us every breath we draw, every day of our lives.

And yet, "God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but may have eternal life." (John 3:16) The good news of God in Jesus Christ is that God does not hate the world; God loved it, and loves it still. And we, even in our shadows, struggle to love God. That's what this whole season of Lent is about: not a morbid time of self-flagellation to wallow in our shame, but a time when we rededicate ourselves to loving Christ, removing from our lives all those things which limit our ability to love God and one another, deepening our prayer so that we can learn to believe.

But what does it mean to believe in Christ? How do we leave the cave? St. John of the Cross distinguishes three stages in Christian belief. Believing in God is only the first. To believe that God exists is essential if we are going to participate in reality rather than in a world of shadows, but it is not enough. As the apostle James writes in his letter, dripping sarcasm, "You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder." (James 2:19) James points out that it is possible to believe that God exists, and to hate God. It is possible to believe in God, and yet to rebel against him. It is even possible to believe in God, and to like God, and to allow that reality not to alter your life. After all, I believe that atoms are the building blocks of matter, but that doesn't change what I eat for dinner or how I treat my mother. Atomic theory seems to me to be true objectively, but not personally.

In order to enter into the spiritual life, we have to get personal. We must move beyond simply believing in God, and begin to believe what God says. After we accept that Jesus is the Son of God, we are called to follow Christ: to listen to his teachings, to wrestle with the meanings of the parables, to find his way of life so compelling that we try to live as Christ taught us to live. Christ reminds us, "those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God." (John 3:21) Belief that is real comes to light in deeds. We do not merely think what is true; we do it. And doing fosters greater belief. At first, it can be frightening to share what we have, to enter another person's grief, to turn the other cheek, but once we have tried, once we have learned the joy of living an authentic love, we crave it more and more. Like people in the throes of a new crush, we arrange our lives around the possibility of catching a glimpse of the one we love. We find ourselves pruning things out of our lives so that we have time to volunteer, time to study holy books, time to pray, time to care for those we love. Our hearts burn to help one another, and our lives take on a new form, turning away from what is not good, embracing those things which give life.

Gently, step by step, this new life leads us into the highest form of belief: believing into God, believing in God with such a strong, transfiguring love that we ourselves outgrow what is merely human and enter into Christ, where what is human becomes divine. In this stage of faith, we outgrow all our familiar analogies; we discard the evidence of our senses, the knowledge of our intellect, and all our familiar ways of knowing, which are shaped and constrained by the created world, and so cannot take us all the way into the heart of the Uncreated One. We enter into the path of contemplation, turn away from all that is not God, from lesser goods as well as from what is not good, and rest in God alone. (Edith Stein, *The Science of the Cross*, p. 118) We emerge from the shadows to look at the sun itself, at the Son himself.

This is our highest and best calling, to enter into God. It is the invitation Christ extends to us when he says, "Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. ...As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. (John 15:4-5, 9) Christ invites us into the love that the Father has for the Son, into the heart of the Trinity itself, for there, and only there, will we be perfectly fulfilled. There, and only there, will we live fully into the one in Whose image we were made. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but may have eternal life."