

Monday of the Second Week in Ordinary Time (MLK Day 2019)

Today the Church celebrates the Memorial of St. Agnes of Rome. Very little is known about her except that she was very young (about 12 or 13) when she was martyred in 304 AD. She was reported to the authorities for being a Christian by a man whose sexual advances she refused. Legend states that in refusing the proposals of many men, she would say that she was already espoused to her bridegroom Jesus Christ.

This legend fits well with the gospel for today, where, in fact, Jesus refers to himself as the bridegroom and, in response to a question about fasting, states that wedding guests do not fast while the bridegroom is present.

The image of Jesus Christ as a bridegroom and the Church as a bride is a beautiful one. It refers to the religious truth that God has chosen to espouse himself to humanity and that he does so in the person of his only Son, Jesus the Christ. In other words, God has married himself to us.

This is a great Mystery that expresses an incredible reality; that God has chosen us and has committed himself to us forever and unconditionally. Even when we are not faithful to God (and that is often), God remains faithful to us and is constantly calling us back to fidelity. One can argue that most of the Bible is about this truth. In the Bible we find story after story of humanity's infidelities and God's fidelity.

In yesterday's first reading from Isaiah (chapter 62), speaking for God, the prophet says:

No more shall people call you "Forsaken,"
or your land "Desolate,"
but you shall be called "My Delight,"
and your land "Espoused."
For the LORD delights in you
and makes your land his spouse.
As a young man marries a virgin,
your Builder shall marry you;
and as a bridegroom rejoices in his bride
so shall your God rejoice in you.

We shouldn't be surprised that the very first miracle Jesus performed in his public ministry took place at a wedding celebration. Is Jesus revealing something about himself and about his mission? I believe so, Jesus is the bridegroom who has come to claim his bride and to bring about the salvation of God's people. In him we, once again, belong to God and nothing, even sin, will change that reality.

Jesus came to make all things new. He changes water into wine. He changes an estranged people into a chosen people.

The odd sayings in today's gospel only makes sense in this light. No one puts new wine into old wine skins and no one sews new cloth onto an old cloak. Old wine skins will burst and old cloth will tear.

Jesus came to bring something new and in order to receive it, we must change old ways of thinking and acting and embrace new ways of thinking and acting. That's why his mission begins with a call to repentance. Turn away from sin and believe in the Gospel. Leave old ways of thinking and behaving behind and follow the new path, the new way, the way of the Gospel, the way of discipleship.

Today we celebrate the 90th birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. As we do each year, we honor the legacy of man who, over fifty years ago, began a movement to change old ways of thinking and behaving, especially in regard to racial discrimination. He had a dream of a day when all people would be equal and the dignity of each and every person, no matter their race, color, language, religion, national origin, would be respected and honored.

He brought a new vision that many people found difficult to embrace because their wineskins were old and their cloaks were old.

The journey for racial equality was long and hard and still continues. The vision of King, like that of Christ, found resistance because change is hard, especially when it requires new ways of thinking and acting.

I googled Dr. King and new wine skins and, lo and behold, Dr. King preached on this Gospel at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, AL on October 17, 1954. (Isn't the internet great?) Dr. King preached that new creative ideas, like that of racial equality, are often not accepted because people are not yet ready to receive them. He said that it is like putting new wine into old bottles.

“To put this new life into the old patterns of thinking was like putting fresh flowing wine in a dry and rotten bottle. It is inevitable that the bottle will break and the wine will run out. The old will not hold the new.”

We are living at a time when old patterns of thinking are once again being challenged and there is, understandably, great resistance. This is happening not just in our country but around the globe. According to Amnesty International there are 25.5 million refugees and asylum seekers presently seeking a new home. This sad reality is a challenge to all the nations of the world as they discern how to deal with, what some call a Global Crisis.

Dealing with this reality requires new ways of thinking and acting. I invite you to join us after Mass for a reception and a discussion on the Dignity of Immigrants and Refugees sponsored by our Martin de Porres Society and our Social Justice Committee. New ways of thinking and acting require openness and study as we seek to understand our present realities and as we seek solutions.

In his Message for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees in 2013, Pope Francis called the world to solidarity with refugees and migrants based on a change of attitude: Solidarity is born precisely from the capacity to understand the needs of our brothers and sisters who are in difficulty and to take responsibility for these needs. Upon this, in short, is based the sacred value of hospitality, present in religious traditions. For us Christians, hospitality offered to the weary traveler is offered to Jesus Christ himself, through the newcomer: “I was a stranger and you welcomed me” (Mt 25:35). The duty of solidarity is to counter the throwaway culture and give greater attention to those who are weakest, poorest and most vulnerable. Thus “a change of attitude towards migrants and refugees is needed on the part of everyone, moving away from attitudes of defensiveness and fear, indifference and marginalization — all typical of a throwaway culture — towards attitudes based on a culture of encounter, the only culture capable of building a better, more just and fraternal world” (Message for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees, 5 August 2013).

If our God has espoused himself to us in Christ, then we are inextricably connected to God and, consequently, to each other and to all of humanity. We are called to see every human being, no matter the differences, as brother and sister. We are called to become new fresh wineskins so that we can be filled with the wine of Christ, which is the wine of love, compassion, and solidarity with all of our brothers and sisters.