

Reflection for Oct. 14, 2024
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The first readings this past week and today reminded me of a short course we had while in the novitiate when Margaret Brennan invited English Jesuit Fr. John Bligh to teach us about Paul's message to Galatians and Romans. The basic idea I got out of it was dealing with the LAW and the SPIRIT! How do we examine these two and make them part of our Christian understanding? What is God asking for in our response? Well, Paul says it's like when we are young, we need a tutor—That is the Law or the Commandments (what should we do, how should we behave, what should be our concerns about community?), but when we grow up or mature, Christ has come and then we are justified not by keeping the law, but by FAITH. We are being led by the Spirit. In Christ, we are children of God through Faith. Faith is a gift, not something we have earned.

It is what the Church was asking of us after the Vatican II Council. Yes, we lived by the law and kept the commandments, but we were called to become mature Christians and live by the Spirit. We were to allow the H.S. to lead us and be open to the Spirit alive in our ordinary lives and choices. Pray, ponder, and discern what God is asking of us before making choices as mature Christians. It's a little more demanding. Things are not just black and white. We were to look at Jesus' example and words and try to live them.

Paul expressed in Galatians the tension between nature and the Spirit. We contain both; by nature, we follow the Law, but we know that we don't get justified by keeping the law; it ends in death. Whereas life in the Spirit, which surpasses our human ability, leads to eternal life. The Spirit frees us from nature's slavery to death. Salvation comes through the Spirit, the gift of the Risen Christ; the Spirit raised Jesus from the dead. His flesh was transformed into an instrument of eternal life.

In the Gospel, Jesus responds to "this generation" who asks for a sign. Jesus tells them there will be no sign except the sign of Jonah. Note: at the proclamation of Jonah to repent, the people listened and repented. **There is a greater than Jonah here!** And yet you don't believe. He also speaks of the Queen of the South who comes to Solomon, attracted by his wisdom and yet "**there is a greater than Solomon here.**" And yet you don't recognize him as a SIGN!

So, in other words, strangers and foreigners listen and respond. For example, the Queen of the South- an African and the Ninevites (the hated Assyrians who destroyed the Northern Tribes) were converted by Jonah's words, yet **a greater than Solomon or Jonah is here!** The Gospel says the Queen of the South and the Ninevites will rise and condemn us for not believing and recognizing the SIGNS of Jesus.

Pope Francis says Jesus was talking to the doctors of the Law. They didn't understand the signs of the time. They called for extraordinary signs because they were closed. The Law at the time had become a closed regulatory system. God of the law, yes, they believed, but not a God of surprises! They failed to understand the many signs Jesus gave them.

Gerhard Lohfink says: "Demanding a 'sign' really is an evasion. The true sign from God is standing before them. The sign is Jesus himself, with the authority that speaks in every word he says and in the healings he performs before their eyes. They want something spectacular, a big visible miracle. Jesus will have none of it!" Lohfink says that what they are doing "is asking to be 'dispensed' from believing!" The Spirit of Jesus was far greater than Solomon or Jonah. It dwells in the fleshly temple of our bodies and *actually exists with all men and women throughout the world*. This line struck me as well as the words of Carroll Stuhlmueller, who says:

some people with little or no understanding of Jesus manifest a prophetic spirit, an honesty and reliability, a generosity and concern for (others) that puts to shame many Christian believers, including ourselves.

I kept thinking of the people on the Facebook videos I have seen again and again of the people surviving the floods in western North Carolina: everything is destroyed, their roads, their homes, their businesses and because they are in the mountains, help is having a hard time getting to them. But they speak of the wonder of the help from the surrounding communities and the help coming to them from outside. I felt like that quote was talking about them. The Spirit is alive in their generosity and gratitude for those around them, putting themselves out to assist in any way they can. The Spirit of God is alive and exists with all men and women worldwide: our hope, our promise.