

## **11<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time**

A theology professor once proffered the question to his graduate student: "Don't you think almost all our spiritual and moral struggles are basically centered around addiction and idolatry?" And off he went. But his rhetorical question lingered on in the student's mind for days. Needless to say there are myriad volumes written on addiction, so on that topic I will not bore you. On the contrary, in this reflection, I would like to focus on idolatry. I suppose, by 'idolatry', the professor did not merely refer to worship of images of God. Idolatry is wrongly identifying a symbol with what it signifies. It is the confusion of map and actual territory.

Today's Gospel text begins with these words, "Jesus said, 'This is what the kingdom of God is like'" (Mk 4:26) Like! And the gospel text concludes with these words, "Using many parables like these, he spoke the word to them, so far as they were capable of understanding it. He would not speak to them except in parables..." (Mk 4:34). Parables!

One of the situations of concern in contemporary society, I think, is the loss of the sense of symbol – a discomfort with the language of symbolism, particularly in matters of religion.

There are very well-intentioned Christians – who perhaps are too well-intentioned – who don't seem to hear the linking word 'like' in the preaching of Jesus. They make no distinctions between analogies and truth-claims. I have not yet come across anyone who has made the mustard seed an idol, just because Jesus said the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed! But without much thought we might 'absolutize' some other images that Jesus offers us in order to invite us to contemplate the mystery of God and His kingdom: such as the fire of hell and the water of baptism!

Three year ago, one Pastor Mack Wolford died from a rattlesnake bite during an outdoor church service just because he failed to accept the language of symbolism in Mark 16:18 (which says, "They will pick up snakes in their hands and be unharmed should they drink deadly poison"). Pastor Mack Wolford, who was only 44, in death followed his father who also died of snakebite in the context of practicing his 'faith' among the sect of "Serpent Handlers"!

On the other hand, we also have the group of very rational people to whom the symbolic language of religion seems only irrational. These are the new breed of aggressive atheists. For instance, Dawkin's *God Delusion* is a telling example of the abject misreading of the symbolic character of religious language. In a sense, these atheists are often desperately reacting against the exaggerations of religious people, of the kind who allow themselves to be killed by snakebites in the name of faith!

Both the irrational religious and the rational atheists have something in common. They are both idolatrous. They have reduced images to reality. They have mixed up the map for the territory. One group absolutizes symbols and deprives the symbols of their depth, and the other group absolutizes the symbols and throws them away.

The gospel text of today invites us to be open to accept that we really cannot know everything about the kingdom of God, and the only meaningful way of speaking about the Kingdom is by means of symbols, parables, metaphors. Of course, Jesus "explained everything to his disciples when they were alone" (Mk 4:34), but if we continue to read this same Gospel of Mark we see how dull the disciples were in understanding Jesus (e.g. Mk 6:52).

So, why use parables, symbols, and metaphors? Symbols are the meaningful expressions of mysteries. And the matters of God and His presence are mysteries. Symbols allow paradoxical expressions. They are never complete. Yet they are rich. They invite us to add to them. They evoke emotions. They bring people together in a common search. They help us situate ourselves culturally. They provide identity to our belief and belonging. And this is the function of authentic religion: to foster our search for God. And the language of symbols seems to be the most meaningful way of approaching the Divine.

Tony de Mello has this powerful aphorism: When a teacher points out at the moon, a wise child looks at the moon, a naïve child looks at the finger! Religious symbols, including the parables of Jesus, point out at the Divine – God and His reign!

In today's Gospel, Jesus narrates to us two seed-parables. The first illustrates the process involved in the growth of the grace of God in us and

in the world around us. The second parable contrasts the paradox of the reign of God – it is invisible yet it is also very potent and powerful. In both there is an element of surprise. We do not know how the seed grows. And the mustard seed small as it is can become huge! Yes, are we ready to be surprised by God? Being humble enough to be surprised by God, I think, is the antidote to idolatry in our world today. Amen.

- Fr. David M. Chiantella