22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time Year A

28th August 2011

There are perhaps two dominant images of God and both emerge from the way we reflect on human experience.

The first image is of a cruel sadistic God – a God who permits evil, judges harshly, punishes indiscriminately and even demands the death of his own Son. The more we think about God in these ways, the more likely we are to live in fear or otherwise reject God with contempt.

The second image is of a God of love who has favourites and who will be protected from the worst effects of living in an otherwise dangerous world. Those who obey this God we will live a more charmed life than others. Those with a profound sense of justice and compassion reject this God too.

Despite their obvious shortcomings both images remain popular precisely because they don’t require too much effort. The problem with both is that they are fixed and static. Events have to be judged in a way that makes them fit our image of God.

The Gospel way of thinking about God however is never simple. Thinking about God requires some effort and is also a life’s work. It requires the effort of a life’s work because the Gospel way of thinking about God is grounded in a personal relationship and like all of our relationships it grows and responds to the events of life.

Last week we heard how Jesus bigged-up one of his followers, Simon and praised him for thinking the way God thinks. He also gave him the name Peter and prophesied that he would be the rock on which the Church would be founded.

This week however, Peter gets into trouble because he tries to protest against Jesus facing his destiny. Jesus reacts rather harshly, after all Peter is surely acting out of concern for his Master. May be, but he is also insisting that Jesus should conform with his image of the Messiah. Peter’s thinking about God is not Gospel thinking.

Jesus points out that Gospel thinking requires us to move beyond fixed ideas about God, about suffering, about success and about life itself. Saint Paul too urges us to discover the will of God by thinking about God’s mercy. In this we he says we can think and act in ways which instead of merely conforming to the rest of society are based on knowledge of what is good and perfect.

Thinking about God in a Gospel way is what we are about as Christians. It may not always be easy, in fact it can sometimes bring us trouble, but ultimately, as the prophet Jeremiah discovered it becomes a fire burning in our hearts.

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