

PENTECOST IV St Bart's

For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be members of one's own household. Matthew 10:34

So, this is the good news? I wonder what a newcomer, whom we might call a seeker, would hear and think if these lessons were their introduction to Christianity?

We have the slave Hagar cast out into the wilderness with her illegitimate son who Abraham has disowned in obedience to his wife. Then Abraham promises to “make a great nation” of this son, who elsewhere is named Ishmael, the wanderer. Instead Ismael lives in the wilderness and “becomes expert with the bow.”

Then we have the passage from Romans, in which we die with Christ.

And then we have Jesus' family values: *Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me.* Matthew 10:39

I'm not getting into the weeds about these difficult passages. I commend to you a very fine book called, in fact, Jesus' Family Values by Professor Diedre Goode. I Googled her and was excited to know that she now lives in Maine. The kernel of her ideas, from what I can remember reading the book about 15 years ago, is that things were very different in first century Israel from what they are today. Duh! Yes. The concept of home was very different. The concept of family was very different. So when Jesus invites, or commands,

people to leave their homes and follow him, he means that he is forming a new family. Following Jesus would disrupt family systems, and would mean, probably, a much more egalitarian arrangement. But it would alienate your birth family, or at least cause much anger and sorrow. It would mean coming not with peace, but with a sword, piercing the hearts of those left behind. I'm not going to go further with this as I've now run out of reliable memories about Ms. Good's book. But again I commend it to you; it would make a great book group adventure.

What I really want to talk about this morning is the passage from Romans. *For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.*

When parishioners used to ask me what happened in baptism, I would reply "It's one of the mysteries." Now that was a cop out but also true; what happens with any sacrament is at bottom a mystery. But one day when I was contemplating this passage, *For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his*, I had a vision of what it meant. I understood in a profound and complete way what happens in baptism. I still can't explain it.

But here's my best shot. If Christ is truly in us, then we have died with Christ and have risen with Christ. Baptism unites us Christ in death and in new life. If we are committed to Christ through baptism then we have died with Christ and are born into new life with Christ.

(I realize I'm saying Christ a lot." Because I don't believe that the Risen Christ is neither male nor female. But I can't bring myself to call the Risen One "They.")

I'm reading a very difficult book: difficult because it is so painful and frightening. The author is – and now I'll try to pronounce it – V.V. Ganeshanathan.. She comes from Sri Lanka, and the book is called Brotherless Night. It takes place during the early years of the civil war in Sri Lanka which lasted for 26 years, ending in 2009. The narrator is a young woman, Sashi, an aspiring doctor, whose brothers and beloved neighbor all join the Tamil Tigers, who called themselves a liberation army. They want to create a separate, Hindu state in the north part of the island to escape the repression of the Sinhalese, the Muslim majority. The war is vicious and both sides commit vile atrocities.

Sashi eventually loses several of her brothers in the fighting. She is appalled by the tactics the Tamils are using but she believes in the cause; she lives in a state of permanent apprehension and ambivalence.

And then her beloved K, her neighbor, decides to go on a hunger strike. He has risen to leadership and prominence in the Tigers and believes that his deed, protesting an alliance that was unfavorable to the Tamils, would be effective. K asks Sashi to accompany him, and she agrees.

And he starves to death in a very public way. Sashi tells us “ In a time of peace K would have been cremated. He would have burst and sparked on a funeral pyre like tinder. He would have risen into the air as smoke... I could say that he was only a friend, but that would not be true, that would not be right. K is more always; he is with me still. In the West, people think women of my country leap into the fire with the bodies of men we have loved. But he was only a friend – only– and I let him go. They took his body from me, but it did not matter. Do you see now? Do you understand? In K I had and lost such a friend that I became the place where his body burned.”

I gasped and sobbed as I read this book: it is so sorrowful and heartrending. And I hope it's not culturally insensitive to think that Sashi has a kind of baptism when K dies. She dies – certainly part of her dies– with K's death, and then he is always with her, as Jesus is with us.

Baptism is both mystery and bedrock. Both loss and gain. Both death and birth. It is our hope, the hope of being with the Risen Christ. It is our salvation, the finding of Christ within ourselves.

Well, this has turned into a baptism homily, hasn't it? Too bad nobody's being baptized today. Instead we will partake of that other mystery, the Eucharist, wherein we receive and remember the Christ who dies with us and is risen within us.

Therefore we have been buried with Christ by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of God so we too might walk in newness of life. Alleluia! Amen