

“When the crowds saw it, they were afraid, and they glorified God, who had given such authority to men” (St. Matthew 9.8)

Holy Scripture, being the Word of God, is meant to teach us something about the nature of God in each part. Sometimes that's more obvious than others. All that we know and think we understand about God, all of our Theology, comes from the study of Holy Scripture where God is revealed to us. And sometimes, in learning more about God, we are taught important truths about ourselves, too. Truths that exist outside of our individual persons, but apply to the whole body of Christians around the world.

Our Gospel lesson from the 9th chapter of Matthew does indeed tell us something about the nature of God the Son. Jesus is brought a paralytic man to be healed. Jesus responds to this profession of faith by indulging them and pronouncing the man's sins as forgiven. This attracts calls of blasphemy from some in the crowd, for the only person who is able to forgive sins is God, so this man is calling himself God. Jesus then asks them a question, “which is easier for me to say, your sins are forgiven, or get up and walk?” It would be easier to say, your sins are forgiven because we can't see that action at work like we can see whether the man gets up to walk at the second option. So, said Jesus, watch what I do next so that you may know that the Son of Man has the authority to forgive sins. He says, “get up and walk”, and the man does what he is commanded. If Jesus can do the *harder* of the two things, it suggests he certainly *does* have the power to forgive sins, too.

This is an invitation to *trust* God. To trust that he is doing things that we might not be able to see – just as the witnesses to this miracle could not see the action of the forgiveness of sins. But Jesus wanted the crowd to understand that he had this power more than just have them watch a healing. The power to forgive sins is proof of his divine identity – proof that he is the son of God – proof that he is divine himself. We learn that we can trust God for what he does behind the curtain, but we must also believe what we see from him on stage, too. To believe, to have faith, and to trust God is the first step.

Our Old Testament lesson also tells us something about the nature of God. Abraham successfully bargains God to spare the city of Sodom if merely 10 righteous are found within it. Now, this might tell us that God didn't believe there would be 10 righteous in the city, and from the interaction we see in the next few verses, that might have been the case – for the city is utterly destroyed after Lot is saved by the angels of God. But Abraham's bargaining with God tells us that God is willing to negotiate, and it tells us that he cares for the righteous. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews writes that Jesus is the new great High Priest – the mediator or negotiator – between humans and God. He bargains on our behalf. This is why we call him an advocate – a supporter, or campaigner – on our behalf. St. John writes, as we hear every week, “If anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the propitiation for our sins.” Jesus advocates and mediates on our behalf with the Father, and even though we sin, we can be comforted that Jesus will go to bat for us to reconcile and to appease the Father of our misdeeds. In this Old Testament lesson, we can see an anachronistic antetype for Jesus. We see Jesus in Abraham because we know what Jesus does for us, even though the original readers of Genesis wouldn't have seen Jesus here – for they didn't know him. This nonetheless tells us something about the nature of God.

Additionally lucky for us Christians, those who believe and accept Jesus Christ, God does care for the righteous and does not automatically sweep them away with the unrighteous. This is lucky for us because St. Paul tells us we are made righteous in the eyes of God through Jesus. Jesus makes us righteous even though we could never attain righteousness ourselves. Because of this promise, we are given a new chance on life. New life in him that we must take on and live

out, even if that means a complete pivot and abandonment from our old selves. And we need to this to attain our everlasting rest in eternal life.

St. Paul, writing in his Epistle to the Ephesians in today's epistle reading, describes to his readers that they must change their ways in order to properly live as Christians. They mustn't ignorantly act as though they know better, but instead must open up their hearts to change and embrace the new life. They must abandon their heartless, shameless, greedy, and unclean natures, because if they truly had heard, learned from, and believed Jesus they wouldn't act this way anymore. St. Paul tells the Ephesians in each case they must abandon something negative and take on something positive. Put away lying, but speak the truth. Do not steal, rather work hard and share from what you earn. Don't spew evil speech from your mouths, instead speak that which builds up those around you. Be kind, tender-hearted, and forgiving to one another, just as God has first showed you these characteristics through Christ.

These, of course, are the ideals. And we all know we don't live in a world of ideals. Because God loved us so much, he didn't want us to be robots so gave us free will to choose and make our own choices. Unfortunately, some people make poor choices. But we are pleasing to God when we make the right choices willingly. As our Collect points out to us, we are only able to know how to please God because he leads us down the right path if we let him. We have to be willing to let him lead us down that right path.

Sometimes, when we take a look at the world around us, it feels impossible to think that God is at work. The senseless violence taking place in Gaza resulting in hundreds of deaths and thousands of injuries is so unnecessary. Despite the blame being cast back and forth and fingers being pointed, both sides are now responsible for committing atrocities and destroying the lives of millions. It's hard to see how God is at work here, for sure. I've even read some suggestions that the "Holy Land" seems more like the "forsaken land" right now. But we know this is not true. Despite all of the signs that make it look like the forces of evil are in control, we do know that God is still at work – we just can't always see it. Sometimes it is our own blindness, our own unbelief that stops us from seeing it. But we know He is somehow at work in the hearts and minds of the people stuck in this terrible situation. Perhaps he is the hope of those facing the prospect of missiles in the middle of the night, or he is the comfort to those who are holding their lifeless loved ones in their arms. We know that he is there because he has promised us he would be always there until Jesus' second coming when he shall judge the Earth.

While this might feel like a stretch to the lessons we have read from Holy Scripture today, I don't think that message is lost at all: God is at work even if we cannot see it. The Holy Spirit is always moving among God's people. But we have to be open to hearing His Word. We have to be open to receiving his call into our hearts. We have to be open to reach up and take hold of the hand that is guiding us down the path even if we don't know where that path might be leading us.

Our God is a God of love, but we have to be willing to go with him, because he loves us too much to force us to do anything. We must choose it ourselves. But just because we cannot see God at work, doesn't mean he is not trying to reach out his hand and take hold. Just because we cannot feel his presence doesn't mean he's not standing behind us waiting for us to recognize him. Without first recognizing God and allowing him to lead us, we will be unable to please him. So, we must try hard to set ourselves up for success when he comes knocking. We must try to live our lives as St. Paul beckons us, so that we can recognize him in every person we meet. We must cast away our lives of sin, and take up the example that Christ has given us of self-sacrifice, unconditional love, and regard for those less fortunate than ourselves. If we aim to behave more like Christ, we can all the more easily recognize his call and respond accordingly.

For God is always at work, we just need to be able to recognize it.

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