

Rev. Derek Fairman

18th Sunday of Ordinary Time A

For many, there is a need for a place, at least in the heart and the soul, in which we can find somewhere in which we can be ourselves, where we can be free to be ourselves apart from others. There have been novels, music, and so on, about this desire for a place that others do not know, a place away from noise and others' expectations. This place is somewhere in which we can find ourselves, a place where we can grow.

This takes us back to the Song of Songs, in which the Bride is described as an enclosed garden, a fountain sealed. The garden is closed to everyone except the Bride and Bridegroom. The fountain is sealed, which is strange, because why have a fountain that does not avail water to everyone? Yet the Song of Songs describes the love of God for His people, and foreshadows the love of the Lord Jesus for His Bride, the Church. Yet the Song of Songs has long been a favorite book for contemplatives in the Church, and a book that has produced many commentaries.

In the Gospel, we hear that the Lord Jesus went to a deserted place, after hearing of the death of St. John the Baptist. We hear the disciples remark that the Lord Jesus was in a deserted place, as if St. Matthew wanted to emphasize the importance of the loneliness of the place, that it was abandoned. In a way, this deserted place was emblematic of the Lord's sadness over the death of St. John the Baptist, but there is more. The Lord Jesus wanted to find a place in which He could be alone with the Father in prayer. Even the Lord Jesus had a place in His Sacred Heart in which He was alone with the Father.

There are times whenever we need to find that place in our hearts. We need to let go of the noise that so often fills our hearts and souls. If we remember the Greek fable of Echo, Echo was a nymph who was consumed with chasing after Narcissus, who only loved himself. Echo could only repeat the last words of another. Sometimes in our minds and hearts, what we hear and see echoes in our minds. There is not much originality, and so just as we are what we eat, so our minds and hearts can be full of what is around us.

Sometimes there is the need to go deeper, not to simply repeat what surrounds us, or even what we might think about this issue or that issue, as important as those might be. We might want to go beyond being what others might expect or want us to be, and instead of being in an active position, we want to just step back and not worry. We can be more passive and listen. There is room where we can find something deeper.

Yet this can lead to an escape from reality. In the Philokalia and other writings, spiritual authors speak of *prelest*, a kind of condition which is based on illusion. We can get caught up in dreams and construct elaborate illusions, about how great things would be if things in the world, or in our lives, were different. There is a way in which we get caught up in a pretend world, that makes that place in our hearts seem like it is all just pretend, that place where we can be ourselves apart from the noise and others' expectations. That is not what the Lord wants for us, to just get caught up in a dream world that is fragile and can shatter easily.

When the Lord Jesus went apart by Himself to a deserted place, He did not do so to escape reality. He did not get lost in an illusion. The Lord Jesus was in perfect union with the Father, not lost in a dream. The crowds found Him, and He would have to fill the depths of their longing. The Lord Jesus did that with the Eucharist.

In the Eucharist, we find that garden and fountain, where the Lord Jesus meets us, and this place, this inner room, is not a dream or an illusion. In the Eucharist, we find our hopes alive, our fears conquered, our anxieties are met with compassion and trust. In the Eucharist, we find the Lord Jesus, who nourishes the deepest parts of our souls, those parts of ourselves that are mysteries even to ourselves.

This sounds like something that might appeal to those in religious life or the priesthood, especially to those young women who are called to religious life. Granted, yes, that image of the garden and fountain has nourished saints in the religious life for centuries. If that image strikes you in particular, perhaps that is where the Lord is calling you. Yet for so many people, there is the need to find that place in our souls away from the noise and others' expectations. We all want to find that place, but there is always the danger of illusion. The Eucharist ensures that we do not go down a road of pretending but rather see ourselves as God sees us.

Spending time with the Lord at Mass, and enjoying His Presence in the Eucharist, rather than getting through Mass as quickly as possible, and moving on is an important key. Spending time at Eucharistic Adoration is another key. The Lord Jesus quietly waits for us in the Tabernacle to come to Him in prayer. Being able to let go of the noise that can fill our souls and hearts is another; being able to quiet ourselves in prayer is another.

As we approach the altar, we thank the Lord for the Eucharist, and for filling our souls with His goodness. We ask the Lord Jesus to continue to nourish our souls, especially the deepest part of our souls, which only He can see clearly with us.