

Homily, St. Andrew's
Easter 6B (Mother's Day), Sunday, May 10, 2015
1 John 5:1-6; John 15:9-17

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be ever more acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

**At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;
Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,
But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,
Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards,
Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point,
There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.**

This is an excerpt from the middle of TS Eliot's poem "Burnt Norton", the first of his famous "Four Quartets." The "Four Quartets" take the reader on a kind of spiritual journey through life and death and hope that starts in "Burnt Norton" with a reflection on the transient and circular nature of time, beginning: "Time present and time past; are both perhaps present in time future,; and time future contained in time past." And so the poem and journey begins, bringing us quickly to a point of focus beyond stillness and beyond movement "at the still point of the turning world." At this point, the poem opens up a kind of question... what is this still point? Or where is it? Or when is it? How do we recognize or know or find the still point amidst the turning, whirling, swirling of time and of life?

Today's passage from the First Letter of John offers an answer, in a poetic, circular way typical of many biblical writers. Our writer today begins with a statement: "everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God..." And then the rest of the short passage expands and defines and argues the statement, almost as though responding to the reader's questions along the way. [Feel free to follow along in your bulletins...]

Q - "But how should we respond to God and God's children?"

A - "everyone who loves the parent loves the child."

Q - "How do we know if we love God's children?"

A - "By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments."

Q - "But what does it mean to love God?"

A - "For the love of God is this - that we obey his commandments."

Q - "Is it hard to obey God's commandments?"

A - "His commandments are not burdensome.."

Q - "Ok - what will happen if I obey God's commandments?"

A - "whatever is born of God conquers the world."

Q - "What does it mean to conquer the world? What would that look like?"

A - "This is the victory that conquers the world, our faith."

Q - "So who conquers the world?"

A - "The one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God."

The argument ends where it began... with faith in the God who sent Jesus as the Christ. First John's still point is this: belief in Jesus Christ, the Son of God. That is the focus around which everything else turns.

Now, on the one hand, a circular argument proves nothing. An argument that begins and ends in more or less the same place is no argument at all. On the other hand, however, the rhetorical strategy of using repetition to expand and explain each statement is clear and effective. It is reminiscent of the core Hebrew poetic technique of parallelism, where synonymous statements, or almost synonymous statements are used to slowly unfold a story or to make a theological point. Poets seem to wonder things like: "How many different words can I use to describe darkness? or light? or love?" And in doing so, they offers deep reflection about spiritual truths that prosaic argumentation simply can't explain.

Today's passage from the Gospel of John - the ground from which John's letters come in the generations that follow - is a good example. In a mere 9 verses, the word "love" appears 9 times, with all but one occurrence in only 5 verses. The word "command" or "commandments" also appears 5 times. It's not that he didn't know any other words, but rather that the imperative of love and the giving and obeying of commandments are dance partners that simply cannot be separated or adequately explained without the words doing a bit of a jig. Without God commanding us, there is no love of God; without obeying God's commandments, there is no love for God; without loving God there is no love for one another; without love for one another there is no belief; without belief there is no dance and without the dance, there is no life. It is at this point, the still point, of the turning world, that we find life and that life is the belief in Jesus as the Son of God.

The challenge of our Western world is that in modern times, 'belief' came to mean, first and foremost, an intellectual exercise of assent to propositional truth - propositional truth expressed most obviously, and sometimes problematically, in the historic creeds, whether or not they were originally intended that way or not. In modern times, 'belief' was an affair of the head, rather than a journey of the heart or a conviction to be acted upon. Faith became much more about prosaic argument than poetic love affair. But in recent years, a tide has begun to turn as people grow weary of debating truth and desire beauty, poetry, instead.

John Fischer is a Christian musician and pastor who found himself wondering how much of his faith was really his and how much was a function of his Christian upbringing and community. In his book about his spiritual journey of faith, titled "Making Real What I Already Believe," he reflects: "The book of Acts is, as its name plainly states, a book about the action of faith. These people acted immediately on their faith. They took huge risks to believe. Often, they acted before they fully understood what it was they were doing. Swept up and carried by their faith, they acted first and read about it later." (13-4) He contrasts this with our world today and wonders if "we Christians are so filled with teaching... that we are too full to act. It's easy to become so mired in dogma that you render yourself incapable of doing anything other than attend one more seminar to sort it all out." (14) Instead of another seminar, Fischer chose to live differently. He moved away from his comfortable life and familiar church community. He literally moved across the country in his desire to, in his words: "know the questions to all my answers; the despair that stands opposite my hope; the lostness next to finding; the sin that required the death of the Son of God..." (40) His problem wasn't that he didn't believe in Jesus

as the Christ, the Son of God... his problem was that the familiarity, security and comfort of his faithful life was prosaic. His head was fine. It was full of all the right things... but he wanted to put his heart into his belief. He wanted to have a love affair with God and know "the victory that conquers the world," in real and concrete ways. By the end of the book, he is as faithful and believing a Christian as he was at the beginning. But everything looks different and his life is not the same.

The journey of life and death and resurrection is itself a strange, circular process that makes little sense. The miracle of new birth - of death being transformed into new life - cannot be explained in any intellectually satisfying way. The one small passage of First John that we heard today tries, in its own way, and yet still the journey of its argument is more, so to speak, than a sum of the parts. Somewhere in the swirl of our identity as children of God, our obedience to God's commandments and the victory of faith, we find love. Somewhere in the tumbling of hope for victory in the end, the love of God, and faith in Christ, we know ourselves as children of God. Somewhere in the twirl of obeying God's commands, identifying ourselves as God's children and loving both God and neighbour, we discover faith in Christ. Somehow in the midst of the dance, there is belief. There is God. There is life in all its fullness. This is the transformation that Fischer experienced when he sought to make real what he already believed. And with him, our frenzied existence is calmed and our lives find peace when we focus on Jesus the Christ. The still point of the turning world.

None of this is new to any of you. You know that your faith in God, your belief in Jesus as Son of God, your life lived out in obedience to God's command to love your neighbour as yourself is all intimately connected to your love for God and that this love comes from the love of God. You know that this love, and this belief gives you life - yesterday, today and forever. We already know and yet still, every year, we make a journey with Jesus through the miracle of birth, the revelation of familiar teaching, the constancy of life, the struggle of temptation, the devastation of sin, the desperation of prayer, the despair of death, the shock of resurrection, the dis-orientation of change, the re-birth of community and finally the growth of our spirits. We already know it all and still the journey matters.

In the very last section of the fourth and final of TS Eliot's "Four Quartets," the poem "Little Gidding," he writes: "We shall not cease from exploration; And the end of all our exploring; Will be to arrive where we started; And know the place for the first time." May your belief in Jesus as the Christ this Easter season bring you the victory that conquers the world - faith. May you know the peace, joy and love of the eternal life of God. And no matter how many times you've been here before, may you know it for the first time.