

Twenty-Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B
Num 11:25-29
Ps 19 *passim*
Jas 5:1-6
Mk 9:38-43, 45, 47-48

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[On a couple of occasions I have been called upon to teach an introductory theology course on the Creed to deacon students in the first year of their formation. I have challenged those students to preach, at some time in their life as a deacon, a homily on "consubstantial." This is at long last my own attempt to meet that challenge.]

Today is the 26th Sunday in Ordinary Time, in the 2nd year of the 3-year Sunday Lectionary cycle. Jesus has just left us with a lot of harsh words. Look around and you'll see very few Christians making their way missing hands or feet or eyes. The Church has never applied these words of Jesus literally and has in fact prohibited Christians from taking them literally. We are called to take them to heart, but metaphorically. The message is that whatever separates us from God is not worth keeping.

Lectionary Year B focuses on the Gospel of Mark. This morning I'm going to pause our journey through St. Mark. The passage we proclaimed two weeks ago marked the Gospel's turning-point. After checking on what people were saying about him, Jesus confronted the apostles: "Who do *you* say that I am?" Peter piped up with the answer: "You are the Christ," Christ being a Greek word meaning "anointed one," which in Hebrew is "Messiah." So, the apostles, through their spokesman Peter, acknowledged Jesus as the long-awaited savior of the Jewish people.

Jesus, while accepting Peter's answer, immediately dashed their expectations. Jesus the Messiah was not going to throw off the yoke of Rome and restore Israel to its ancient glory; no, Jesus was going to establish God's kingdom in a radically different way. And so, Jesus had to work at training his apostles and his disciples to see him the right way.

So, let's pause: Who is this Jesus we believe in? At every Sunday Mass, right after the homily, we recite the Nicene Creed. Notice: a good half of the Creed is about Jesus. In the 4th century, starting with the Council of Nicea in the year 325 and ending with the Council of Constantinople in 381, the bishops debated with each other and struggled over the Church's understanding of Jesus and who and what Jesus is.

As you know, our religion is based on a number of mysteries, each one dealing with a big question. Who is God? How and why did God become human? How is Jesus present in the bread and wine the priest consecrates? How can an all-good, all-loving, all-powerful God allow so much suffering and misery? How can human beings be created in the image and likeness of God? There are no simple answers, no quick or easy answers, to

any of these questions. Many of the truths God has revealed outstrip our human capacity to understand, and we call them mysteries. Please take note: it is *not* the case that we can know *nothing* about a mystery; it *is* the case that we cannot know *everything* about a mystery. “Well, it’s a mystery,” is an important observation but it’s only the beginning of the inquiry, not the end of it.

So, for instance: there’s a threeness to God we call person, and a oneness to God we call nature. But the three Persons comprising the one God do not divvy up the divinity of God. Each one of them is 100% God, and yet each one is distinct from the other two. Jesus is the Second Person of the Trinity. The Second Person entered into human history and culture by becoming a human being, Jesus of Nazareth. As John the Evangelist put it, “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” Jesus of Nazareth was one person BUT, unlike anybody else in the history of the world – anybody else – he has two natures, a divine nature and a human nature. BUT (again) Jesus is not half man and half God. No, Jesus is 100% human and 100% divine.

In the 5th century, the Church struggled over the question whether the Blessed Virgin Mary could be properly referred to as the Mother of God. Everybody agreed that it would be ok to call her the Mother of the Christ, but Mother of God? The problem, you see, is that however much it seems to make sense to think of her as the mother of the human part of Jesus, THERE IS NO HUMAN PART OF JESUS apart from his divinity. Jesus is 100% human *and* 100% divine. Mary is the mother of Jesus; Jesus is the Second Person of the Holy Trinity; Jesus is God and Mary is his Mother; Mary is therefore the Mother of God.

Back in the 4th century, in the days of Nicea and Constantinople, various factions tried to “make sense” out of Jesus, and most of those efforts to “make sense” took the form of wrapping either the humanity of Jesus or the divinity of Jesus in quotation marks. Some teachers taught that Jesus was not really human but only “human,” only sort of human. Others said that Jesus, while very important, was not really God, only “God.” The words of the Creed were hammered out specifically to affirm that no, Jesus is really human and really God. Jesus is “God from God, Light from Light, and true God from true God.” And then the Council Fathers of Nicea and Constantinople hit us with a blockbuster of a word: “[the Lord Jesus Christ is] consubstantial with the Father.”

Do you remember the translation we used to use? We used to say, “one in being with the Father.” Why the change? There are different explanations, but I think it was because “one in being with the Father” was too easy, too deceptively simple. We think we understand what we’re saying when we don’t really. “Consubstantial” is like a gigantic electronic billboard that reads, “Big mystery here.”

I will try to give you a tiny (and therefore inadequate) explanation of “consubstantial,” but first let me repeat that human language and human understanding are not up to the task of grasping much of what God has revealed. We express ourselves and attempt to communicate using words, but all our words can do when we talk about God is give rough approximations.

Let’s imagine, then, for the sake of discussion and speaking metaphorically, that God is composed of some “stuff.” Whatever that stuff is that makes God the Father God, Jesus is made up of exactly the same stuff. Jesus is not some pale imitation or fuzzy copy; Jesus is not the junior varsity, some in-between demi-god. No, Jesus is the real God, the right stuff. Jesus is consubstantial with the Father.

As you come forward today to receive Jesus sacramentally present in the consecrated bread and wine, as you step forward to receive the bread of life and take up the cup of salvation, embrace the mystery of faith and accept him as your brother and savior, as your teacher and model, and as your Lord and your God.