12 B 2024

In these days of Centenary celebrations, our minds are directed this year to St Francis’ reception of the mystery of the Stigmata. Christ’s love has moved Francis to such extremes, for he desired to feel what Jesus felt in His passion. For him, this was the first and last word in everything.

Francis embraced the whole truth of denying himself, taking up his cross, and imitating Christ. The Gospel was his daily bread. He did not confine himself to reading its words, but through the expressions of the revealed text Francis set out to discover the One who is the Gospel itself. By his life Francis proclaimed and continues to proclaim today the saving word of the Gospel.

Our firm decision from the day of our Profession is to work from this focused center, that one man, the Lord Jesus, died for everyone. This puts everyone in the same boat. Jesus included everyone in His death so that everyone could be included in His life—a resurrection life—a far better life than we could ever have lived.

With Christ’s death, a new era has begun. Through baptism, we are joined to Christ in His act of dying. In being configured to Christ’s death, we put off the old person with its sinfulness and weakness, and we live with that life which characterizes Jesus Himself in His self-giving.

The result is a whole new mind-set, that we no longer judge, no longer see only the weak, the sinful, and the perishable. This new order is now a radical change of life, a conversion, with sins forgiven. We become the New Creation—the putting on of Christ—a transformation which ultimately transforms all of creation. Through the Incarnation, a transcendent God becomes immanent in creation. Francis becomes a symbol for us of our own potential unity with God. The stigmata helps Francis realize his own participation in divinity. Through the stigmata he received, his understanding came through, and was expressed by, his body. If Christ is to be born in us, He must be born in our bodies as well as in our souls.

Francis’ seraph purges him of any sin by using the wounds of Christ. Through the stigmata, Francis’ body itself becomes a prophetic statement that human beings can become like Christ through total identification with His suffering. Heaven comes down to earth rather than the mystic rising up to heaven, transformation in which compassion for the suffering Savior was given expression in Francis, and through him, was channeled into devotion, art, and culture. La Verna changed the Incarnation from a divine event to a human possibility. As Francis experienced God’s immanence in his own flesh, he understood more deeply God’s immanence expressed throughout creation.

And so, where do heaven and earth intersect? The traditional answer in theology has been the human creature. And where does this take place? Tradition takes us back to the Book of Genesis, and points to a cosmic dimension to evil and human suffering. I find it puzzling that so much of our doctrine of creation has focused on Genesis rather on the Book of Job, since for us, it makes its appearance as today’s first reading.

In Job, we see the Creator speaking directly about God’s creation, about justifying the human creature. Satan wagers God that Job, representing all humanity, fails as God’s human creature. Job as human, is the glory of the Lord. Satan wagers otherwise. If Job fails to measure up to God’s expectations, then it also means that God fails. God’s glory will be seen as an illusion when it comes to the human creature.

This means the Book of Job is not simply about the justification of God in the light of evil. Rather, it has more to do with the justification of the human caught in the web of evil. What makes human justification interesting in the Book of Job is that it revolves around a bet. Satan bets God the human creature is not what God intended him/her to be. How the bet will be settled is not clear. But the theme of the Book of Job is not precisely suffering, but rather how to speak of God in the midst of suffering.

What justifies Job’s humanity is that in spite of his suffering he was able to speak well of God. God’s integrity is found in the whole creation. What about Job’s integrity? What makes Job truly human? Job’s integrity lies in being able to enter into the very wisdom of God’s plan for God’s creation. Creation itself has its own integrity. It is not a machine with which one can tinker with abandon. Job is not being invited to reverse-engineer God’s creation so that he can create beautiful creatures like God. The wisdom being offered Job is not one of engineering design, but one fitted perfectly to the human creature: to help bring abundance of life and beauty to what is already a marvelous creation.

In the few sentences describing how God restores Job’s lands and families, Job’s newfound wisdom allows him to bring abundance out of the natural and social world around him. This speaks directly to Satan’s wager.

Because of God’s integrity, the human has integrity. Every breathing Franciscan would know this, because Francis experienced this. In the mind and heart of Francis, the human creature would realize, not destroy God’s creation, but would make it even more marvelous.

