Seeing Jesus, From the Inside-Out

**John 1:29-34**

The next day he **saw** Jesus coming toward him and **said**, "**Behold**, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. 30 He is the one of whom I said, 'A man is coming after me who ranks ahead of me because he existed before me.' 31 I did not know him, but the reason why I came baptizing with water was that he might be made known to Israel." 32 John **testified** further, saying, "I saw the Spirit come down like a dove from the sky and remain upon him. 33 ***I did not know him***, but the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'On whomever you see the Spirit come down and remain, he is the one who will baptize with the holy Spirit.' 34 Now I have **seen and testified** that he is the Son of God."

**Noticing the Verbs**

One of our recent retreat directors (Fr. Mark Lewis, S.J.) focused his conferences on the verbs in the Gospel readings. This approach has stayed with me, particularly when a Gospel text feels “old” or “too familiar,” making prayer difficult. Because it helps to consult the Gospel in its original language, this post will put that consultation at your service.

* **Saw** – original verb used indicates physical seeing of a fact
* **Said**
  + **“Behold”** – original verb here indicates MORE than physical seeing, but rather seeing that perceives meaning, seeing that grasps truth deeper the physical fact, spiritual seeing / understanding.
* **“Testified”** – original verb here is the root for the word “martyr” in English.
* **Seen** and **Testified** – original verb for “seen” indicates MORE than physical seeing. John “has seen”, meaning that he “has understood” who Jesus is . . . and out of this understanding, is able to “testify” (a word connected to “martyr”) to Jesus being the Son of God.

**Reflecting on What We Have Noticed**

Reflecting on the “constellation” of the above verbs, the Gospel reveals that it is not enough for us to “see” Jesus or His Church in a merely physical, i.e. institutional, kind of way. In fact, in Mark 6. 33 – 52, we see that the Apostles were “physically” present to the Lord Jesus as he miraculously fed 5,000 with five loaves and two fish, as he taught the people on the shore, and as he joined them in their boat after having walked toward them on the water. And yet, their physical seeing of Jesus or their physical presence with Jesus did not automatically result in understanding, for this text concludes by saying that “They had not understood the incident of the loaves. On the contrary, their hearts were hardened” (Mk 6.52). Institutional belonging to Jesus is simply not enough.

Another statement in this Gospel that reaches out to us is John’s admission: “***I did not know him.***” On his own power, John the Baptist is capable of *physically* seeing and observing Jesus, but incapable of *understanding* who Jesus was from the inside out. On his own, John was incapable of perceiving the spiritual truth that this man Jesus (in the flesh / a “flesh fact”) was the Son of God. Fulton J. Sheen is often quoted as having said: “Divinity is always where you least expect to find it.” This insight deepens our appreciation of John the Baptist’s inability to know Jesus. Who of us expects divinity to come walking toward us “dressed” in human flesh? At times the Lord asks us if we really believe that the Incarnation is real, materially real.

Finally, this Gospel reveals that it is only in relationship to the Holy Spirit that John the Baptist is able to see MORE than flesh when he saw Jesus walking toward him. It was the Holy Spirit who enabled him to UNDERSTAND, or SEE from the INSIDE-OUT, that Jesus was the Son of God.

**Harvesting the Lord’s Invitations:**

There are a number of invitations embedded in this Gospel:

1. The Lord Jesus invites us to ask for the grace to understand Jesus and His Church from the inside out; to peer deeply within Jesus and His Church to perceive the divinity that is really, if distinctly, present in both. Seeing that *understands* is the kind of seeing that bears fruit in a life of “martyrdom” or “testimony” to the Lord Jesus’ mercy and goodness and poverty.
2. The Lord Jesus invites us to a more activated capacity to perceive God’s divine presence in those places and persons we least expect to find His presence, beginning with ourselves as we are aware of our sinfulness. To accept (much less embrace) that the Lord Jesus is present within us *in our sinfulness* can be difficult. To accept that Jesus is deeply present to us as the light *in our darkness* runs contrary to the many ways we have been told that we need to “measure up” before He makes His home in us. However, when we surrender to Jesus’ presence *to us* and *within us*, we are freed to accept and embrace His presence in those around us, perhaps most especially in those we might judge as not measuring up.
3. The Lord Jesus invites us choose a gentle attitude toward ourselves and others when we are nervous about not having “measured up.” Such a gentle attitude is a concrete act of living faith in Jesus’ closeness to us when we fail, for it seems that Jesus is *especially* close to us *in our awareness of our failures.* Our ability to embrace God’s presence and to hold one another in gentle regard, even in our nervousness, is at the heart of letting *the Lord build us* into the communion He has called us to be.
4. Finally, the Lord Jesus invites us to consciously ask His Holy Spirit to “breathe” this understanding and surrender into our hearts, our words, our gestures. If, in praying this Gospel, the Lord is inviting us to a more activated capacity to perceive and embrace His presence in ourselves and in others, He is also leading me to know that we are unable to *live his invitation* without the life-giving presence of His Holy Spirit.