

Third Sunday of Lent – Cycle C (2010)

St. Mary's Church

Richmond, VA

Fr. Michael Renninger

The elderly monk looked at me, and he said, “Michael, don’t fall in love with Jesus.” I was talking to old Fr. Alex, who asked me a simple question: “Michael, why did you become a monk?” And I responded with youthful enthusiasm, “Because I want to fall in love with Jesus. I want to live my life close to him.”

In a soft voice, Fr. Alex said, “Michael, don’t fall in love with Jesus. Don’t get too close to him.” I asked, “Why not?” And Fr. Alex said, “Because he will break your heart.”

This was not what a 22 year old novice wanted to hear – I had just embraced the joys of celibacy – but this didn’t sound very joyful! But now I am 47, not so novice any more, and you know what? Fr. Alex was right.

What do I mean?

Well, on one hand, the Scriptures tell us that those who fall in love with the Lord, are blessed. Think about the people of Ancient Israel – there they were, slaves in Egypt. But God hears their cry. God appears to Moses, in the form of a miraculous, burning bush. God sends Moses to lead the People to the Promised Land. Finally, they are free! And what does God ask in return? “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind and soul.” Just fall in love with God. And the people did! They had seen God’s miracles. They knew God was taking care of them. Imagine how easy it was to love God as they set out for the land flowing with milk and honey.

But...these same people who loved God, ended up lost in the middle of the desert. They gave their hearts to God - then they had to wander in the desert, lost. Sure, they loved the Lord, but now, their hearts were broken. They realized that loving the Lord did not mean that they would always be protected from pain. As we heard in today’s second reading, the people of Israel would still have to wander, still be tested, and they would occasionally have to ask, “If God is with us, why does He feel far away?” And “If God loves me, why does he break my heart?”

But, in the desert, in their heartbreak, they were learning something vital. In the desert, in their heartbreak, their love was being purified. Back in Egypt, when God was working his wonders, they fell in love with God, but they fell in love with him because of what he was *doing for them*. But in the desert, in their heartbreak, they learned to love God simply for who God is - they began to learn how to love God even when it appeared that he wasn't doing many miracles for them. They learned to love God, not for what He *did*, but for *Who He is!*

As I prayed over these Scriptures, something struck me in a new way. Did you notice the difference between the plant in the Old Testament reading and the plant in the Gospel? In the Old Testament reading, the bush becomes miraculously vibrant and radiant! God takes an ordinary bush, and He uses it to interrupt the flow of ordinary life. In the Old Testament, the plant is a radiant sign that God is with us!

And in the Gospel? Well, in the Gospel the plant...just...sits there. Doing nothing. Creating nothing. The gardener had been doing his part for three years, but this plant just sits there. Jesus suggests that somehow God is still at work in this plant – but to the naked eye, it looks like things are barren.

Isn't that part of how we experience God, too? Some days, God takes ordinary things, and uses them to reveal his presence and power very directly. And other days? Nothing. Not a peep from God. Not a single green bud on our tree. Maybe that is why Fr. Alex said to me, "Don't fall in love with Jesus – he'll break your heart."

Because On the one hand, like the ancient Israelites, we all have moments where it is very clear that God is right there, in our midst, working on our behalf. There will be days, and seasons when it seems like God is sending one blessing after another. We sense, deep in our hearts, his love, his presence, his power, his peace. At times, God interrupts the ordinary, and the burning bush is right there! So we take off our shoes and move closer, because we know we can't live without God.

And then, just when you think you can't thank God enough...he breaks your heart. The burning bush becomes a barren tree, and life can begin to feel...empty. Christ will ask you to look at your life with a new level of honesty – and you may not like what you find. God will ask you to carry a cross that you don't want to carry. He will ask you to trust him and be

patient, even as things seem to fall apart all around you. Christ will ask you to change behaviors, sins, attitudes. Christ will say, “keep on loving me... even as your dreams fall apart, even as your life feels barren and dry, even as everything unravels, keep on loving me.” It will feel like He’s breaking your heart.

The Christian life is not for those looking for an easy road to heaven. The journey to the heart of God always leads through Calvary. Go ahead, fall in love with him, but don’t panic when it feels like he’s breaking your heart.

Because, as it turns out, Fr. Alex had one more thing to say. He did tell me that Jesus would break my heart. But then he said, “Oh, and by the way, after He breaks it, he will put it back together. And when the Lord puts your heart back together, then your heart will be bigger than before, and stronger than before, and more capable of holding joy and peace and hope than before. The barren tree will blossom to life. The broken heart will be mended. Just as the bread which is broken, makes us whole, and makes us holy, and makes us His.