

Where is God?

I have to say that when I read the readings for today, they left me feeling quite alone, even abandoned – when it comes to God.

After all, in the first reading, there's Jesus saying goodbye to his closest friends as he moves into that place that's in the nearer presence of God.

That place we call "heaven."

Peter's letter, the second reading, is all about the suffering that comes with discipleship and the lonely struggle of faith.

And finally, in the gospel lesson, we listen in on Jesus' intense conversation with the Father, as he prepares for his crucifixion; the ending of his time on earth among his friends.

Taking all these readings together left me wondering; what on earth can I possibly share with you today?

What insight, what consolation, what strengthening of the faith can possibly come from three readings that seem to shout out:

God's gone!

"After all, how many of us think of God as some elusive being who's never actually present in our lives?

How many of us think that it's only through tedious religious discipline that we might have a momentary encounter with God?

How many of us, having engaged in those tedious religious rituals, and never having an experience of God, feel excluded or unworthy?

And how many of us, who have had an intense religious experience, find ourselves pursuing evermore extreme religious practices with the hope of re-creating that one time event?

How many of us think of God as someone we'll meet in the future, like a long lost friend who unexpectedly shows up at a party?"
Peter Rollins, *Insurrection*, 124-125, modified.

Yet none of these feelings and thoughts are actually Christian.

As Pete Rollins reflects:

After the death, resurrection and ascension of Christ, "we **can have** fullness of life - here and now.

Not because we somehow overcome our suffering and doubt, but because now, in Christ, we can bear their weight.

We discover that God isn't someone who shows up occasionally to hand out medals or gold stars.

Rather, we slowly come to realize that God approaches us — mysteriously — as 'the other.'

That God's presence in this world is found in the very midst of this world's suffering, alienation and pain.

That's the good news!

That's everlasting life!

Paradoxically, it's when we forget about God, when we turn away from our self-interested desires, from our search for and longing after meaning, immortality, and purity, when we lose ourselves in love for the 'other,' then, and only then, do we encounter God." Id.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran minister who was executed for trying to overthrow Hitler, has a great deal to say about the God who is absent from us:

"We cannot be honest unless we recognize that we have to live in the world — even if there is no God.

We recognize this fact even as we stand before God!

God himself compels us to recognize it.

So our maturing in faith leads us to a true recognition of our situation before God.

God wants us to know that we must live as people who manage our lives, without him.

The God who is with us is the same God who forsakes us.

The God who lets us live in the world without a working theory of God is the God before whom we stand continually.

Before God, and with God, we live without God.

God himself is willingly pushed out of the world onto the cross.

God is weak and powerless in the world, and that's precisely the way, the only way, in which he's with us and helps us." Modified.

We've all heard the story of the Greek god, Sisyphus, who's constantly pushing a stone up a hill, only to have it roll down again, only to push it up again, and have it roll down again, and again, and again.

How many of us experience life this way?

Whether it's a dead-end job, a dead-end relationship, or simply a sense that life itself is a dead-end?

That sense of the dead-end is the direct consequence of focusing on ourselves, on our own wants, needs and desires.

And a faith that's focused on self is doomed to that same dead-end.

The glory of Christianity is that it calls us out of ourselves, and into the lives of the least, the lost, and the left behind.

The genius of Christianity is that only by getting out of ourselves, by seeking out those in need in our world, it's only then that we at long last encounter God.

We discover that God is not typically found in church, nor even in the rituals, nor even in those good deeds done for the sake of gaining entry into heaven.

No.

God is discovered in the face of the "other."

In the face of the one in need.

In the face of the rejected.

As Thomas Merton says,

"Christ always seeks the straw of the most desolate crib to make his Bethlehem."

Jesus leaves the disciples, and us, today, because it's only by leaving us that he can be truly present with us.

Only in his absence can we meet him face-to-face.

Isn't that the paradoxical truth of the cry of desolation from the cross?

"Eli, Eli lama sabachthani!"

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

It is in godforsakenness that God stands most closely with us.

And while many of us believe that there is a grand scheme to everything, that answers will someday be provided for all of life's pain and misery, that reasons will be given for the things that most perplex us, perhaps that's simply whistling past the graveyard.

Because, we are called to be co-creators with God.

Perhaps we are called to be co-creators with God because creation itself is something that cannot be predicted.

Its endpoint, its destiny, is not certain.

In physics, particularly the strange field of quantum mechanics, we come to learn that objects are changed by the mere fact of observing them.

Think about that in the context of creation.

Because creation is changed **by us participating in it.**

And if our participation brings the love of Christ to one another, if we bring a selfless sense of giving out to and for each other, if our goal is to lift up the least, the lost and the left behind, then who can predict the unimaginable beauty that might be born as a consequence?

Who knows but perhaps we shall come to bless every hardship and every difficulty in our life — just as we now bless every joy and happiness?

This is the heart and soul of our faith!

It's taking the leap, trusting the net will appear.

Which is why, in the end, Christianity is not a religion.

Religion is about humanity seeking God.

Christianity is about God seeking humanity.

And in that seeking, God shows us that the way to encounter the Source of life is purely and simply through the act of self-giving love.

These reflections came home to me when I was reading the Forward to a book that my cousin Ed wrote back in 1970 when he was a missionary in the Philippines.

The title of the book is Mayukmok, the name of the small town in Mindanao where Ed lived.

In the Forward to that book, the writer bestows on Ed what is probably the highest compliment any missionary could receive.

Which is: Ed had become a Filipino.

Unlike most missionaries who strive to make the newly converted look like them, Ed became one with the people he went to love and serve.

And perhaps that's the heart of today's message.

Who are we to become if we wish to encounter the living God?

We are called to become Jesus in this world.

And we become Jesus in this world whenever we pour ourselves out for the benefit of those in need.

In that very moment — the absent God appears — and smiles.

+amen