

21st Sunday 2010

If the beginning of this homily sounds like something from the DaVinci code, I apologize. I don't want to give you the wrong impression but when I was reflecting on the second reading from Hebrews about "discipline", I was brought back to memories of my early Jesuit training.

When I entered the Jesuit novitiate more than 40 years ago at the tender age of 18, the early formation of Jesuits were still holding on to some of the monastic practices. One of them emphasized self-inflicted pain to remind you that without pain there was no spiritual gain: it was called the "Chain and the Discipline". The chain, or catena, was made of wire with pointed ends that you would wrap around your thigh so that when you sat down you would feel these little stabs of pain. A sign would go up on the bulletin board the night before you were supposed to wear the chain. Catena. You'd put it on when you awoke and kept it on during meditation, morning Mass. You could only take it off after breakfast. The funny thing was that the best breakfast in the novitiate, "homemade corn bread" always seemed to be served on Chain day. I'm not sure if it was supposed to be a reward for wearing the chain or another example of "enjoy, but not too much". The discipline was a little whip made of rope and in my time you had to ask special permission to use it. The pain inflicted was minor when you would fling it against your bare back but it was enough to remind you of the temptations of the flesh and your need for self-control.

It's that word "discipline" that captures my thoughts and imagination this morning/evening. How do you hear that word? Does it have a negative connotation as I just described with the little whip of rope? Is it a necessary evil? (strange expression) As if evil were necessary!) What is your experience of discipline? As a

parent, a son or daughter, as an athlete, an artist, a professional of any kind? Have you ever been in situations where you have thought, “why don’t those parents discipline their children? You can’t just give them free reign. They’ve got to be taught how to behave”.

I think we might agree that “discipline” in life is a necessity. If you want to become a good “anything”, you need the rigor, the focus, the demanding work that brings you to another plateau of performance. Even the exceptionally gifted athletes and artists need the self-discipline that allows them to widen their expertise at the same time as they narrow their focus.

OK. Hold on to discipline for a bit and we’ll come back to it. Let’s shift for a while to “wide” and “narrow”. These are the other two words that jump out of the scriptures this morning. The first reading says Open Wide. Bring in all peoples, all nations to my holy city. Cast a wide net to draw everybody in. Let everyone who has never seen or heard the mercy and glory of the God of Israel, come to the holy City. Do you get the picture? A wide panorama of people streaming in, being welcomed together as God’s own sons and daughters.

Then there is the “narrow” of the Gospel. Try to enter through the narrow “door” or “gate. Jesus tells his disciples that it’s not going to be easy to squeeze through the door. There’s no “free reign” into the reign of God. Better start working out if you’re going to make it through. Get on that treadmill! It’s ironic that the text from the Old testament today gives an image of God that is wide open and inclusive and the New testament, one that is quite narrow and exclusive. Usually we think of the reverse. The God of the “old” is narrowly focused on “obedience to the law” and the God of Jesus is widely open to all through the God who is love.

So perhaps it's a question of both/and, not either/or. (It being salvation, the experience of God's free reign.) Perhaps the clue here is the word discipline. Did you ever make the connection between the word "discipline" and "disciple"? To be a "disciple" takes "discipline." Jesus is continually modeling for his disciples what it means to be in a relationship with the Holy One who calls them to sacrificial love as he himself was called. This passage in Luke's gospel is on the road to Jerusalem where Jesus will experience the Narrow beams of a Cross with his arms open wide. That is the cost of discipleship and the paradox we live. It is through the narrow gate of the Cross that Jesus comes to the wideness of God's Reign. And hopefully so do we. And Hopefully so will we.