

Jeff Johnson

Master of beauty, craftsman of the snowflake,
Inimitable contriver,
Endower of Earth so gorgeous & different from the boring
moon,
Thank you for such as it is my gift.

These are the words of the poet John Berryman, written in May of 1970. This is the beginning of the first of his eleven addresses to the Lord. John Berryman, by all accounts had a very difficult life. Although a tremendous poet and gifted teacher, Berryman suffered from alcoholism most of his life. He attended AA meetings and through AA he converted to Christianity. He wrote these eleven addresses to the Lord during a period of consolation—but they are a mixture of deep faith and equally deep despair. He wrote these beautiful poems of prayer and doubt while his life seemed to crumbled around him. They are powerful witnesses of faith, tinged with a nagging question: Why me Lord?

He continues:

I have made up a morning prayer to you
Containing with precision everything that most matters.
According to thy will the thing begins.
It took me off & on two days. It does not aim at eloquence.

You have come to my rescue again & again
In my impassable, sometimes despairing years.
You have allowed my brilliant friends to destroy themselves
And I am still here, severely damaged, but functioning.

We ourselves address the Lord through his many titles:

Alpha and Omega

Messiah

Lamb of God

Prince of Peace

Lord of Life

Horn of Salvation

The Good Shepherd

Bright and Morning Star

The Way the Truth and the Life

Jesus

Author of All things Living

King of Kings.

Next Sunday we will celebrate the Kingship of Christ over all the earth, all that lives and breathes and has its movement in creation. But what do we do until Christ comes again in the full glory of that Kingship to rule the Kingdom of Heaven and Earth? What do we do, the ones who are severely damaged, but functioning, while the whole world seems to crumble around us?

When the early church first read from the Gospel of Luke, the temple had already been destroyed. So when they heard Jesus' prediction of the destruction of the temple. They already sat in Jerusalem amidst the crumbling destruction of the temple. It would be like me saying that two years ago I could predict that many of you would lose your jobs, your savings, your homes. The destruction predicted by Jesus, not one stone shall be left upon another, had already come true. People sat, listening to the gospel of Luke, amidst the destruction of the temple. Much like we sit here today amidst much crumbling and destruction.

Think of the poor people of Haiti. The floods of Pakistan. The economic destruction wrought upon our own country.

We are not unlike the disciples who proclaimed Jesus King then watched a week later as their king was crucified, the ultimate crumbling and destruction of a man who preached God's love and healed in the name of God's mercy.

Like the disciples we ask ourselves, Where is God amidst our own crumbling defeat.

John Berryman, in a moment of despair, wondered the same thing too. He wondered, perhaps, like yourselves, that maybe God is a slob, playful, vast, rough hewn.

What are we to do when important parts of our lives are crumbling like so many stones around? What will the Lord do? The king of kings, and prince of peace. When we suffer from the destruction around us, the loneliness that engulfs us?

Unfortunately, two years after he wrote his addresses to the Lord. John Berryman took his own life by jumping off a bridge. I'm not passing judgment on his suicide. People who commit suicide are experiencing a despair the likes of which cannot be fathomed. We don't say that he was a wimp and couldn't hack it so he killed himself. We look, instead, at someone who experienced life-destroying despair—a despair so powerful that it took his life. We see yet another challenge to our faith in the Lord who is prince of peace and who's burden is light and who's yoke is supposedly easy.

This past weekend on the parish retreat many of the retreatants were facing some very difficult situations (joblessness, loneliness, major transitions in life). Things that

had been rock solid, like a temple, were now crumbling and falling down around them. This raised some pretty tough questions for God to deal with—why don't I have a job, a spouse, a partner, etc.

I think these readings we hear today are about the moments in life when we are faced with ultimate questions such as these. Jesus indicates the painfulness of these moments when he says, "You will even be handed over by parents, brothers, relatives, and friends, and they will put some of you to death." The precariousness of the situation is indicated when he says, "You are not to prepare your defense beforehand, for I myself shall give you a wisdom in speaking that all your adversaries will be powerless to refute."

Perhaps we want to express our anger at the Lord over such waste of life. And that would be OK. If you find yourself in a despair that rivals John Berryman's, perhaps you need to express your anger at the Lord. He's big enough to take it.

When the disciples are fretting about what to do, Jesus says, you are not to prepare your defense beforehand, for I myself shall give you a wisdom in speaking that all your adversaries will be powerless to resist or refute. What are these words of wisdom promised by Jesus. When will we hear them.

I think the words are words of compassion from our brothers and sisters. We look at the pain and destruction in the world and we must be moved with compassion. The compassion is the compassion of Christ who consoles his disciples while predicting their own desolation and despair. Christ says to them and to us, I will be with you until the end of time, and even afterwards.

Moved with compassion, the Lord, the king of kings, sends us the spirit, the advocate to take his place among us, and in turn we are moved with by the spirit with compassion.

Who, upon reading Berryman's beautiful poems addressed to the Lord is not moved to near tears with compassion upon learning that he jumped off a bridge because the destruction in his life was too much to take?

Jesus goes on to say in today's gospel that living amidst such destruction will lead you to give testimony and witness. Our witness is one of compassion. Reaching out to the others in our presence who share in our despair and desolation. We may be ourselves, severely damaged, but we are functioning, as Berryman reminds us. We are functioning yet damaged. Functioning in the spirit of God who strengthens us to reach out to one another, functioning enough to stumble our way up to this table of the Lord and receive his nourishment and his own compassion that he gives us in the his body and blood.

Then we can say with Berryman as we address the Lord together:

Whatever your end may be, accept my amazement.
May I stand until death forever at attention
For any your least instruction or enlightenment.
I even feel sure you will assist me again, Master of insight & beauty.