Homily – 21st Sunday – Ordinary Time B

This is the 20th anniversary year of J.K. Rowling’s imagination that cast a spell with tales of her fantasy world. Her first manuscript, *Harry Potter & the Sorcerer’s Stone,* was rejected by 12 publishers. And they have been weeping in “Regret-land” ever since. The world of Harry Potter is about a young hero facing the evil force that was the dark Lord Voldemort.

Harry’s battle with evil forces and the dark Lord is what Christian Spirituality is all about. His being caught between two voices – goodness and evil – is the story of every Christian who does battle with the same two voices. How we find our way out is called “discernment.” It’s the process we go through to separate the two voices, and freely choose the voice that enables us to taste of the life-giving fruits of joy, contentment, happiness and inner peace.

Recently, a living version of discernment played out when 12 young Thai soccer players and their coach endured 17 days in a dark cave. The coach taught them how to meditate. It was a powerful way to help them stay centered and access the voice of hope of being rescued. It provided enough inner light to keep them from drowning in the inner darkness of fear. It was bad enough that they were smothered by the outer darkness of a cave. By keeping them calm through meditation, the coach made sure they were not doubly smothered by inner darkness in a dark cave.

Harry Potter had Dumbledore, Professor McGonagall and Hagrid, who guided him in resisting the evil energy of the dark Lord. That is the job description of life coaches, wisdom figures and spiritual directors. In biblical literature, the author of the first reading, Joshua, is a life coach to the Israelites.

In recounting the ways that God had intervened in their lives and delivered them from their enemies, Joshua was coaching the Israelites to recommit themselves to their covenant with God; the God who had chosen them to be his people and gave them the Promised Land as their inheritance. He is a voice about God’s fidelity, about God being a promise keeper. In return, God is asking them to honor and serve him alone. While presiding at this covenant renewal ceremony, Joshua is both a prophet and a spiritual director.

In the gospel, Jesus promises to give us himself as our strength for fighting the inner battles that test our skills for discernment. We are blessed that he can offer us his own life so that we can choose the grace that deepens our relationship with him.

When Jesus finished explaining that he was the bread given for the life of the world, many disciples could not accept it. It sounded like cannibalism. Why would they need to eat his body and drink his blood to have life with God? They already had the Law of Moses. The majority of the disciples concluded that it was too much for them to accept.

Jesus was pushing them to new places on the spiritual path. He was offering them new terms for a new relationship with him. It was a relationship not written in tablets of stone, but written on their hearts. He wanted to dwell in them. This new covenant was rooted in his own total self-giving. It is meant to be imitated by how the disciples give his love away. Some found that too costly. In their discernment they could not access the voice of trust.

St. John, the author of the gospel, explained their reactions, “*As a result of this, many of his disciples returned to their former way of life.”* In their discernment, they caved in to the voice of fear. Darkness took possession of them, not light. It shut down their ability to imagine a relationship with Jesus that was based on dying and rising; shedding their old selves to reveal more of Jesus. St. John then implies that when Jesus looked to see who remained, the crowd had shrunk to a mere 12.

One can only imagine the look on his face and his tone of voice when he asked, “*Do you also want to leave?”* In all of John’s Gospel, this is probably Jesus’ most vulnerable moment. All he could do was offer; the results depended on their openness to his Father giving them the gift of discernment. 12 disciples activated it and remained. The others walked away.

The gift of spiritual discernment is tested today. Joshua’s earnest appeal for the chosen people to renew their covenant with God, and Jesus’ ‘hard-to-swallow’ teaching on eating the body of Christ, that forced some disciples to leave and others to stay, are paralleled in the scathing grand jury report out of Pennsylvania. It chronicles the horrifying systemic sexual abuse of children by clergy and the culture of secrecy that the Catholic hierarchy practiced for decades. It has left me feeling anger, disgust and betrayal. As a priest of 46 years, drawn into this nightmare by shame, those feelings may be more raw for me than for you.

In light of Jesus’ question to Peter, *do you also wish to leave,* I have discerned to speak about this. True to my style of preaching, I want to help you find the good news hidden in the bad news of this horrifying mess.

The first thing I need to say is that spiritual discernment, a gift in our church, needs to be accessed to help us sort out the clamoring voices competing for our heart. When we bring discernment into the sadness and shame of our shattered trust, we are able to separate the sinners in the cancer of sexual abuse from the Savior of Sinners who is a victim and the divine healer of our ills.

There is a wisdom saying: *what you focus on, determines what you miss!* If your focus is only on the crimes committed by dysfunctional clergy and the abuse of power by bishops, then you miss Jesus, the divine healer, wanting to break through with healing for our wounded souls that only He can bring. Spiritual Discernment can break the log jam of obsessing on the wrong things.

Lord Voldemort wanted nothing more than to break Harry Potter’s power for good and win his soul for evil. Satan wants nothing more than to keep us focused on the injustices of this scandal so more Catholics will leave and become his disciples.

-2-

Harry Potter was a boy caught between two voices. Catholics today are communities of faith caught between two voices. Shall I stay or shall I leave? Harry used magic to access his power for good. Catholics use mysteries of faith to access the goodness of God to save us from the evil of becoming minions of the evil one – the dark Lord Satan.

Our greatest mystery of faith is the Eucharist. It is the Catholic “thing” that nurtures our Catholic identity. It gives us access to the divine, lifts us from our small world so we can enter the world of the holy, the sacred, to taste food that is eternal. Eucharist is how Jesus gets off the cross, and on the table of plenty, then off the table and into us. In the words of St. Augustine, *“we become what we receive, a blessing for others.”* In the medical world, some people, by accident, become “carriers” of viruses. In the spiritual world, Catholics, by choice become carriers of the Real Presence. After we eat the body of Christ and drink his blood, we become graced sinners.

Like the prophet Joshua, I challenge you, discern again, even in the midst of this ugly scandal, who you will follow. Which voice will you give your heart too. A wounded community needs a wounded people to heal.

Like Peter in the gospel, I encourage you, practice spiritual discernment as you walk the road of this ugly scandal.

Let me close with a few personal thoughts. I would have been long gone years ago, from the church, if I didn’t have a personal relationship with Jesus. He is my best friend, my life companion, my divine mentor. My 72-year old heart, the recipient of many conversions and spiritual transplants, and years of spiritual direction, is attuned to his voice. I trust him to lead and guide me through this valley of tears. You can trust him, too.

Over the years people have asked me, Father Mast when did you decide to become a priest? They are destabilized momentarily when I answer, “This morning!” This isn’t a calling I answered just once, 46 years ago. It is a way of life I have nurtured each day I am blest with life. When I wake up my first words are, “Good Morning God. I am awake. That means you have some purpose in mind for me today. Let’s get on with it.” I pray you will have this kind of intimate relationship with God.

If it helps, know that I believe in you to access every Catholic practice that is the best fit for you at this time. Whether it is the rosary, a novena, a litany, the Stations of the Cross, lighting a candle, burning incense, fasting, meditating, confession, eucharist, spiritual direction, choose whatever Catholic ritual, discipline, or sacrament that helps you renew your covenant with the Savior of all sinners. In the words of St. Paul in the second reading, may these practices keep you submissive to the God who is hurting with us, weeping with us and desiring to heal us. It goes without saying, *I love* *you a lot*, but never more than at this time when we all are hurting together so much.

-3-

As you grow in mastering discernment through this dark night of our church’s soul, if you encounter a bitter Catholic who has walked away like some of the disciples in the gospel, or a non-Catholic who is confounded that you still practice your faith, instead of being defensive, use the words of Peter the Apostle and say to them, *“to whom shall I go, Jesus has the words of eternal life.”* Surprise them by making your behavior through this spiritual nightmare about Him, and not about you.

If you haven’t already guessed, Jesus is the good news hidden in the bad news of this unwelcomed trauma in our faith life. Hold him close, hug him inside so he can love each one of us through this chapter and bring us all into his presence one day where we will celebrate him as the end of this and every redemptive story.

Amen.

Paul Mast is a retired priest of the Diocese of Wilmington, Delaware. He is the author of five books. His website is: [www.paulmast.com](http://www.paulmast.com)