

By Father Charles Bowes

Hosea 2:16b, 17b. 21-22
2 Corinthians 3:1b-6
Mark 2:18-22

It's up to us to show God's compassionate face.

Somehow, mainstream religion seems to have taken the love affair out of a life of faith. Popular caricatures of religious people invariably include those strung up by unfeeling rules and unyielding obligations. Our church at times can look like that.

For many people, religion is about obedience and solemnity and unsmiling faces. God is sort of like the great and powerful Wizard of Oz: an unknown entity behind a terrifying wall of smoke and flame. It is against this backdrop that we speak about loving God, or about God loving us, and it all feels rather unlikely.

We needn't feel embarrassed if our understanding of holiness is awry with exaggerated austerity. Many people who took their religion seriously at the time of Jesus in Mark chapter 2 made the same mistake; they expected a little more piety from his disciples. Everybody thought they knew what holiness was supposed to look like: a cross between a toothache and a funeral. When Jesus explained that it's more like a wedding, it's no wonder that some people didn't get it. They were still trying to get their old God to attend the new party. New wine, new wineskins!

What Jesus encourages is full-heartedness in embracing his way of life: no compromises, no half-measures, no looking back; taking it to the limit. He advocates his enthusiasm in the way we handle what is important in our lives.

Basically, in Mark chapter 2, Jesus tells the disciples that John the Baptist sends: "do what you're doing and give it all you've got. When it's time to fast, fast. When it's time to make merry with the bridegroom, make merry. Put your heart and soul into what you are about and you will increase your satisfaction and happiness substantially."

Lent is only two weeks away – and it's our time of fasting – of making room to invite the invasion of God – and God always comes with the baggage of personal fulfillment to the heart God enters. We can't lose with fasting, with reconciliation, with the disciplines of lent...it just naturally invites the invasion of God.

Can we experience that invasion, God's love tenderly, personally? Are fasting, prayer, works of kindness the vehicles to experience God in a positive way? When is our desert the desert Hosea speaks of in chapter 2: "Thus says the Lord: I will lead her into the desert and speak to her heart." Fundamentalists often speak of having "a personal relationship with Jesus,"

which implies not simply knowing the facts about Jesus but entering into a dynamic companionship with the Lord. Although this rings strangely in Catholic ears, the translation would be this: that God cannot remain the Almighty Object of our worship, but is also to be the God Hosea knew, present to our hearts and in tune with our hearts' desire. God's love cannot be real to us as long as our notion of God remains indistinct and far away. And the way to make God close to us is merely to invite, to open, to fast, to pray, to reach out...that's all...and God invades and gives us the strength to be and to live profoundly...to become the "letter" St. Paul speaks of in second Corinthians chapter 3...in which the spirit of the Living God writes not on tablets of stone but on tablets that are hearts of flesh – our hearts, our flesh. That's what people see and read – our lives enlivened not by our achievements, but by our invitation for God to invade. That's what we do when we receive Holy Communion: we open mouths and hands and eyes to see not only bread and wine but one another, and beneath all to see the Body of Christ we become.

A young college student had searched long and hard for a mentor, for someone to follow as the disciples had followed Jesus. Surely, there must be someone who knew the way to go, someone he could serve, someone who could guide her along the way. But there was no one; every would-be hero turned out to have clay feet, to be just as confused as he, just as uncertain as she. Seeking some answer, he arranged lunch with a seminary professor. There, over cheeseburgers and fries, she confessed the failure of her quest.

The professor thought for a bit and then responded, "I think, perhaps, the time has come for you to understand that you are the one to lead others, at least for a while. Perhaps there is no one who knows the way better than you."

**It's up to us to show God's
compassionate face.**