

A few weeks ago I had the pleasure of meeting my newborn grandson for the first time. He was a little over 3 hours old and at that time was comfortably asleep in his mother's arms. I wondered however what it must have been like for him immediately after birth. He was removed from the comfort of the womb and thrust into a foreign and somewhat hostile environment. He became aware of many things all at once, many unpleasant, and struggled to adapt to his new surroundings. Obviously his caregivers and his parents did everything they could to make sure the transition was as smooth as possible and he will continue to receive love and support as he grows. And as he grows, he will become more aware of himself and others, but it will be a long time before he is fully aware of the world around him.

Awareness... Let us grapple with this for a moment. Awareness is vital to our well being, both individually and collectively, and I believe that there are different levels of awareness.

In the Qur'an translated to English by Abdullah Yusuf Ali is a beautiful verse called the Verse of Light. And I quote...

"God is the Light of the Heavens and the Earth. The parable of his light is as if there were a niche and within it a lamp: the lamp enclosed in glass: the glass as it were a brilliant star: lit from a blessed tree, an olive, neither of the East or the West, whose oil is well-nigh luminous, though fire scarce touched it: light upon light! God doth guide whom He will to His light. God doth set forth parables for men: and God doth know all things."

Following this particular Sura is an appendix that includes an English translation of a mystic interpretation of this verse by Imam Al- Gazali. He starts by describing light: The verses of the Qur'an, in relation to intelligence, have the value of sunlight in relation to eyesight. He goes on to say that the physical eye sees by the sun; the spiritual eye sees by revelation.

The lamps celestial have their own grades and orders, and the highest is the one nearest to the ultimate light. He further describes the 5 faculties or spirits of the human soul: the sensory spirit, the imaginative spirit, the intelligential spirit, the

discursive spirit, and the transcendental prophetic spirit. These are symbolized by the niche, glass, lamp, tree, and oil in the Verse of Light.

Perhaps we can think in these terms of different levels of awareness. The sensory spirit is limited to things we can see, hear, or touch. The imaginative spirit has the ability to conceive of different, creative ways to perceive these senses. The intelligential spirit can then raise awareness to a new level and apply it to the universe, which then leads to the discursive spirit which then is possible of abstract knowledge. And finally the transcendental and prophetic spirit which is possessed by few, conceiving of concepts from other worlds not encompassed by the intelligential or discursive spirits.

In our world much of our awareness is limited to the first two spirits, the others being veiled by darkness. Our own feeble lights keep us from seeing the Light divine. It may not be easy, but with strength and resolve, and combining our efforts, we can choose to raise our awareness to new levels and use it to promote justice and peace and the dignity of every human being. Isn't this, after all, what we are called to do?

As followers of Jesus, His disciples were only somewhat aware of what was really going on. They were witness to His many miracles and teachings and yet failed to fully understand. In today's Gospel, Jesus looks up to heaven and prays to the Father to glorify Him for his hour has come. I believe that it was at this time that the disciples finally became fully aware of what Jesus had already told them many times, that He would suffer, be crucified and then raised 3 days later. He even prayed for them, asking the Father to "Protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one." And they responded in a very human way, with fear and denial, and eventually they deserted Him. And yet ultimately they remained in Jerusalem as He commanded them. They continued to struggle with awareness, understandably so, as Jesus appeared to them at different times and told them to wait for the promise of the Father. Little by little, their awareness was raised until they were filled by the Holy Spirit and they became empowered to carry out God's will, as we learn about in the Book of Acts.

In 2017, I started a new chapter in my life by taking part in Education for Ministry seminars. This experience was instrumental in raising my awareness, and broadened my world view with new insights. One of these is the realization that God's creation is full of beauty, but also that it is ongoing. Which begs the question: what kind of world are we creating? We, the whole of mankind, are part of this Creation, and take part in it. Again, what kind of world are we presently creating? Is it the kind of world we are seeking to create? It is daunting to think of the evil forces at play in today's world. We can, however, effect positive change in our little corner of the world, and I know that this is what we, those of us here, are seeking to do. But are we doing enough?

In our Epistle today, Peter's words sound like they could be spoken directly to us: "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you." So what does this mean for us? How are we to respond? In our awareness of the chaos around us it is easy to respond with apathy, fear or denial; apathy because our awareness is diminished, fear for our personal safety, or denial of Truth. But we are called by our God to respond with love. I believe in the power of love; love has the power to transform lives, grows exponentially when combined with other spirits and agents of change, and has endless possibilities. But in order to harness the power of love, we must raise our awareness, we must be intentional about creating peace, and we must be compassionate. If you have a neighbor that you care about that is suffering, it seems likely that you would try to ease their troubles however you can. This type of compassion must be projected to all in need, and can be most effective when working together in community.

Awareness... Are you aware that according to the New York Times, gun violence is the leading cause of death for American children? Are you aware that the US has 18 times the rate of deaths from gun violence than other developed countries? These are disturbing numbers, and I could go on and on, yet there is hope.

When Jesus prayed for His disciples to be one, he was also praying for us. You are probably aware that there are congregations like this one all across the country

that embrace love and actively seek to carry out God's will. And maybe you are aware that there are social justice organizations both large and small that are working to create a world with justice and peace, a world in which the dignity of all people are respected.

Ours is one such group, a small one, yet we have had success helping to raise awareness and educating ourselves so that our message has authenticity; please join us in the parish hall immediately following the service to learn more about us.

Let us pray...

Dear God, help us to lift the veils of darkness from our souls so that your Light supernal may shine upon all humankind.

Amen