

Father Christopher Roberts' October 21, 2018 Homily

Earlier this week I received a letter postmarked from Singapore. It began, "In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, Most Merciful. Islam is truth." It continued, "Jesus Christ... is NOT God or Son of God but a prophet of God." Finally, it concluded by stating "Liberate yourself from falsehood. Embrace Islam." In the days since receiving the letter, I have been doing a lot of thinking and praying about its contents... You can relax. I am definitely not going to become a Muslim, even in the face of a blade suspended above my neck.

One of the things that came to mind was a memory from my years in Rome when I traveled with some other seminarians during a vacation to France. My friends put me in charge of organizing the trip because we did not have much to spend and I had a reputation for being so cheap that I still had my first communion money. Looking for an inexpensive hotel, I unwittingly booked one in an all-Muslim suburb. As we walked through the streets wearing roman collars, we all started getting cold stares from the locals. What seemed like a good way to save some pocket money began to look very dangerous. When we locked the door to our hotel room, we heard knocks accompanied by what seemed like threats in language we did not understand. We huddled in our beds behind bolted doors, frozen with fear at what might happen to us.

Whilst I slept that night, I had a nightmare that men had broken down our door and were brandishing swords, threatening to kill us unless we said the words, "There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is his prophet." My last memory in the dream was saying to our captors, "You can do whatever you want to us, but we will never renounce our belief in Jesus." As I shared my nightmare at breakfast, one in our company quipped, I would have said, "We will say anything you want as long as you promise not to kill us."

The seminarian who uttered these words abandoned his vocation to the priesthood less than five years after ordination.

Today we begin a three-part series of homilies on Jesus Christ in the Church. I take as my inspiration for these homilies the book that Sister Josephine Rose of Divine Mercy recommended to me during my retreat, *Christ in the Church* by Robert Hugh Benson. This homily will focus on Jesus' identity as God made man and what this truth of the faith means to our daily lives.

Very often when something goes profoundly wrong in our lives, we go through a crisis of faith. Our desperate prayers seem to go unanswered. We knock, but we hear the lock on the door turning against us followed by a cold silence. This feeling of God-forsakenness can last for days, months or even years. We look for an answer from God up there on the other side of the door and none comes. Many walk away from God and religion when this happens to them.

Please listen very carefully to what I am about to say because it is something that is entirely unique to Christianity and holds the key to encountering God in our daily lives. The God that we worship as Christians is not a God who is "up there on the other side of the door"—disconnected from us in heaven. This image of God is not the God that Jesus Christ revealed and continues to reveal to us in His Church. Let's take a closer look at what the Bible has to say to us this Sunday about the real God.

The second reading from the letter to the Hebrews tells us that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. We need to be very clear about what the phrase “Son of God” means. It most emphatically does not mean that Jesus is the son of God the Father in the same way we could be God the Father’s sons and daughters. Jesus’ relationship with the Father is entirely unique, as we say in the Creed, “the only begotten...born of the Father before all ages, light from light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father...” Before Christ was conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Virgin Mary, before the creation of the universe, the Son of God has always been no less God than the Father is God. Last week in our reflections on the Ten Commandments and the story of the rich young man, we recognized that Jesus definitely understood Himself to be fully God.

But if we stop at our Lord’s divinity, we are at risk of reducing Jesus to a god “up there on the other side of the door” who came down from heaven for thirty years, did His work and has returned to splendid isolation. We must never tire of repeating, the God revealed by Jesus Christ is not this type of god.

The Letter to the Hebrews declares, *“We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has similarly been tested in every way, yet without sin.”*

That sentence is worth repeating so that it sinks down into our memory, *“We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has similarly been tested in every way, yet without sin.”*

When we hear that Jesus can sympathize with our weaknesses, we might picture our Lord as the ideal therapist who is a perfect listener and helps to us to work through our problems without charging one hundred plus dollars an hour for his time. Perhaps there is something helpful in this image, but the word sympathize means much more than that in this context. When the New Testament uses the word “sympathize,” it means “to suffer with.” The Son of God took a human nature from the Blessed Virgin Mary in order to be able to share in our sufferings in a real way. Our trials are His trials. For example:

- Jesus was handed over to death by a friend when Judas betrayed Him, so that we who have known betrayal at the hands of a friend could never be justified in saying that God has not felt what it is like to be betrayed.
- Jesus became so anxious as He looked forward to the suffering of the Cross that He sweat blood so that we who are troubled in the face of suffering could not say that God never experienced first-hand what it is like to be gripped by fear.
- He heard the savage cries of condemnation from the crowd when on Good Friday it yelled, “Crucify him, Crucify him,” so that we would never be alone when falsely condemned.
- As He hung dying on the Cross, writhing in pain, mocked by the priests, Jesus looked down at His mother Mary and saw her heart breaking. The soul-splitting sorrow of seeing

a loved one in torment washed over Him so that none of us could ever accuse God of indifference toward those with tormented hearts.

- When Jesus cried “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” as He died, He did so that none of us could ever say that God did not know what it was like to pass through the crucible of death and feel the temptation of thinking that this earthly life is all there is.

“We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has similarly been tested in every way, yet without sin.”

When we have knocked on the door of God’s residence far above us in heaven and believed that there has been no answer, we have been looking for God in the wrong place. Unlike many other monotheists, we Catholics believe that God has revealed Himself to us as one who suffers with us and experiences our trials with us. When something goes profoundly wrong in our lives, we will find God not on the other side but right next to us, strengthening us and loving us through the human nature that He assumed.

Next week, we will talk about how exactly we can encounter Jesus close to us. Bring a friend!