

8.16.26

Fr. Tom Lucas

Yesterday morning I did an ordinary thing. On a trip down to Santa Clara Mission to witness a wedding, I stopped in Burlingame to have breakfast with my sister, her husband, her adult kids, and Merlin, the corgi. Merlin is the latest, and probably not the last in a long line of Corgis that dates from shortly after their marriage in 1974: first Truffles, the smartest of all, then dowdy Alice, neurotic Oscar, snappy Isabella, mellow Eden with different colored eyes, and now Merlin, a wizard of entertainment. My brother in law Dennis' family didn't have dogs: one of his sisters was allergic, but he has made up for it ever since. Merlin, like all the others, is most comfortable sitting by his feet, knowing that little treats will be sneaked to him when my sister isn't looking.

That scene made me think about dogs. Dogs are a part of life, "man's best friend." Which led me to the writings of St. Claude the AI saint of the internet who is replacing St. Wikipedia as my research patron. Dogs, I learned, were the first animals thoroughly domesticated by humans, probably sometime during the last Ice Age, 20 or 30,000 years ago. Wolves were attracted to people, and people apparently befriended the more docile members of the Lupus clan or the canny wolves befriended the gullible humans, and here we are, with Merlin sitting at Dennis' feet.

Dogs appear in the Sacred Scriptures some 40 times. Alas, for the cat fanciers, kitties with the exception of their cousins, the Lion, appear not at all. The sayings about dogs go across the spectrum from negative to positive, from wild dogs who threaten to faithful companions and aids to shepherds; avenging dogs who ate the evil Jezebel to the little puppies who sit with Lazarus under the rich man's table waiting for scraps.

Dogs have shaped us, and we have been shaped them. They use us, and we use them: as guards, as pre-electronic alarm systems, sometimes as friends and companions, and sadly as stereotypes of sub-human violence. Indeed, "dirty dogs" and "ravenous dogs" were used by the conquistadors in Mexico to terrify the indigenous populations whose favorite dogs, the diminutive ancestors of our modern Chihuahua, were looked on as spiritual guides for the deceased across into the underworld. Dogs featured broadly in the racist tropes of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and baying bloodhounds were used to track escaped enslaved people. Anti-Jewish propaganda in Nazi Germany frequently likened the children of Abraham to unclean dogs, and in recent years racist rhetoric has abounded in Washington DC calling immigrants and critics of the administration as "dogs." It's strange how often we take what we love, and make it a source of disparagement or cruelty. The stranger, the other, then one like me must be inhuman, a dog that eats dogs in a dog-eat-dog world.

Prejudice is as old as humanity. My clan is better than your clan, My tribe is stronger than your tribe, my race is purer than your race, my religion is the only way. In today's gospel we even see a glimmering of this in Jesus himself. Going to find some peace and quiet by the coast, he's met by a local woman, a pagan, a country bumpkin—that's what the word pagan means whose daughter is possessed. She begs Jesus to cure the little girl, and Jesus responds with uncharacteristic sharpness: I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." The woman's need, though, is greater than she can bear, greater than courtesy: she persists, "lord help me". Jesus replies: "it is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs. Ouch.

Still, she persists: "Please, Lord, for even puppies eat scraps that fall from master's table." That's the word she uses: puppies.

And so, she catches him up. Perhaps her tone of voice makes him recall his mother's tone of voice at the wedding at Cana. Perhaps her words remind him of the story he himself told about Lazarus the poor man, outside the rich man's house, whose only companions were the little dogs who licked his sores. Whatever happened, something happened. Jesus changed his mind, and changed his tone: "Woman, how great is your faith!" and he cured the child.

We hear in Isaiah today that righteous foreigners are welcome in the house of the Lord, and Paul, the apostle to the gentiles continues to preach good news of salvation to them, to open up the gifts promised to the chosen children to all who are faithful children of God. That includes the foreigner, the stranger, the Mexican guy who cuts your lawn and the Filipino nurses aid who cares for your grandmother, the children brought here by their loving parents to give them a better life.

"Please, Lord, for even puppies eat scraps that fall from master's table."

May our faith in God's mercy be as great as hers, and our compassion be as ready as Jesus' own.