

Lent 2
Church of the Good Shepherd, Silver City, NM

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The Absence of God

For the Sundays in Lent I am taking my themes and ideas from a wonderful little book, Beginning to Pray, by Archbishop Anthony Bloom, whose jurisdiction was Great Britain and Ireland for the Russian Orthodox Church, And was also a writer, teacher and speaker on the Spiritual Life from the Orthodox tradition with quite a following in the Western world. The book is short, with barely 5 chapters, but in it he digs deeply into themes that will help us give feet to our desire to walk by the Law of Love. Today I want to take up the theme of Chapter 1, the Absence of God.

Sometimes it feels like God is absent. We are taught that God is omnipresent, that for God to be absent would mean that we would cease to exist. But since we are still sitting here together, and we can see, talk to and feel one another, and we have an awareness of ourselves present here, it is obvious that God is also present.

In spite of that, sometimes God feels absent. We pray and it feels like the heavens are brass, we go to church and come home feeling the same as when we went. We read the Bible and it does not seem to speak to us. We do good things and they don't feel as meaningful or fulfilling as they used to.

The disciples get a crash course in what it means for God to be absent in today's Gospel lesson. To get into the scene put yourself in the crowd of disciples. You've been with Jesus for 3 years now. You know Jesus is probably the most special person you have ever met. You're convinced he is the Messiah, who will throw off the yoke of Rome and restore Israel to sovereignty. And Jesus says that he will be given into the hands of his enemies and killed. You all stare in stunned silence. You're all with Peter as he begins to take Jesus to task, "But Lord, if you are the Messiah you can't let this happen! We won't let them do this to you! That would be the most disastrous thing ever to come upon the Jewish people!" But Jesus isn't convinced.

Then the horror sets in. He's really going to let this happen! The unfathomable wisdom of his words that at this point are probably just so much mumble jumble, "Whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever will give his life for my sake will save it. Whoever is ashamed of me now I will be ashamed of when the chips are really down!" More stunned silence. Ashamed! This isn't about a political movement like we thought. He's asking us to give up our ideas of sovereignty in exchange for loyalty to him and him alone. And we're all thinking, "We thought we knew this guy, but apparently we don't.

Who is he? What's he all about?" All of a sudden the Jesus they thought they knew is absent and another is in his place. God has all of a sudden become the one who disorients us, runs from us, and forces us into uncomfortable and unwelcome places.

It is a common saying that when we don't feel God's presence it's not God that moved but we. Sometimes it is true. It's like a man who loves to watch football on Monday nights. Now I know I've quit preaching and gone to meddling, and it is made worse by the fact that I am not a football fan, but how many football widows are there in the world? He is there, but he isn't there. He is sitting there right beside you, drinking a beer and staring at the TV, but he is not talking, he is not available. He is present, but he is absent. Now my absences are also felt to my dear wife. They are not because of football, but rather because I am probably out hunting with Sir Rodly, or I am buried in my studies, or so drained from work that I have nothing left to give her. Sometimes it's the other way around, where she, exhausted from a day at work, finds that she just crashes around 8 and heads off to bed, leaving me with the remote control on an empty couch.

As Bishop Bloom notes, God is always more ready to attend to us than we to God. We spend a few minutes a day in prayer, but how about the 23 and a half hours of the rest of the day when our hearts are elsewhere? God has much greater reason to complain about our absence than we of God's.

If in the end all we want is for God to be there for us and we are not ready to reciprocate, one must question what it is we really want. If as soon as we get what we want in prayer our minds wander to other things and our heart grows distant, is it God we desire, or the answer to prayer? Has not the answer to prayer become an idol that we desire more than the Living God? Bishop Bloom says that every word spoken in prayer is a word of commitment—commitment to become part of the answer with God, and commitment to seek the Living God for God's sake and not for any other.

Maybe it isn't always true that it is we who have moved. Mother Teresa of Calcutta went for 55 years never feeling again the wonderful consolation of that moment on the train when she heard the Spirit say to her, "Come, be my Light." For all her efforts in prayer she received only another leper to attend, another speaking engagement to meet. She was attending to God, but God did not attend to her in the way in which God had at one time. Sometimes it is God that has moved. In a true and authentic relationship there is freedom to be who we are. If we could control another's availability to us then there would be no freedom. The question then is, "Will we still seek God? Will we give up our preconceived ideas of who God needs to be for us and seek God for God's own sake?"

When God becomes absent to us it purifies our desire. I love cherry pie. I eat cherry pie

on my birthday instead of cake. When I want but don't get cherry pie, is not my desire for cherry pie all the stronger—unless I really don't desire cherry pie over any and all other desert. Not getting it purifies my desire. It is the same with God. When God is absent our idols can no longer hide. They either prove to be empty, or they prove our hearts to be empty.

Bloom tells us as well that the presence of God is always a moment of crisis. The other day I used a kitchen napkin to soak up some grease in the kitchen. I figured I could just throw it in the wash with some other things and it would be OK, but when it came out of the dryer it was a dull yellow color. It was judged and determined not yet to be clean. It was not going back in the drawer with the others, it needed purification—a good dose of bleach and maybe some time in the sunshine. The Greek word for crisis is related to judgment. In a moment of crisis judgment is required. We must make a decision, get off the fence and commit one way or the other.

When the Living God breaks through to us it always highlights the differences between the purity and holiness of God and our own falseness, brokenness and sinfulness. Bloom tells the story of a man who came to him for counsel. He thought he had lost his faith. When he was asked to choose a passage from the Gospels he related to he recalled the story of the woman caught in adultery. "Who would you be in the story?" asked Bishop Bloom. "I would not have left, I would have stoned the woman," was the reply. Similarly, sometimes we make judgments about other people that are not loving and kind. We see the area of town they live in, or their country of origin, or their legal status, or their manner of dress, and we judge them to be less worthy than ourselves. And so we treat them as less than human. We deny them dignity, we do not listen to their stories as we would have others listen to ours, we exclude, marginalize, demonize or utilize them, unaware that in doing so it is we who are being less than human. We rarely judge others to be more worthy though the act of judgment is just as unfair. We tend not to dwell on the ones we so judge, because they scare us and we don't like to be scared like that. Sometimes we are careless and thoughtless in our use of material things. We consume more than our share of the resources, we dispose of our refuse irresponsibly because it is convenient.

In some situations the absence of God is a gift. Perhaps we should respond with gratitude that God has not shown up, and has given us time to judge ourselves before we are judged. God's absence gives us space in which to prepare to meet God humbly and genuinely, just as we are, exactly, with no pretenses or excuses or false masks on our faces. As the absence of God purifies our desire, the presence of God purifies our intention.

So what do we do when God is absent? We do as the disciples did. We listen and attend. Jesus is asking us to set aside the false purposes of our lives. Noble though they might be, they are less than the very heart of God. Lent is a time of setting aside those distractions which draw our gaze from our final goal. Do not be distracted by the good when what you need is the best.

We work not to be ashamed of Jesus. One can be ashamed of Jesus before the world. Do you bow your heads in thanksgiving for a meal in a restaurant? Do you change the subject when the conversation turns against the practice of faith? How willing are you to make it known that you are a believer, a person of faith? How quickly do you turn for divine assistance in the public sphere?

One can be ashamed of Jesus within oneself. Would you rather not think about the relevance of your faith to your life? Are you so afraid of judgment that you would rather have the absence? Are you so afraid of truth that you would rather have silence? Do feelings of unworthiness keep you from prayer? Do you turn to God only as a last resort? Digging deep into the heart of God is work, the work of pushing away the distractions, noble though they might be, of not settling for second best, of pushing past the absence to the judgment. Do these things seem too much work? Or does the heart of God so call you, so draw you, that all else pales in comparison?

Bishop Bloom explains that the core of the word "humility" is the same as the Latin word from which we get "humus." The earth is there, it is what it is, often taken for granted, often abused by the dumping of our refuse—and yet there it is, absorbing it all, not denying or hiding anything, and at the same time turning so much of our garbage into life. The absence of God must be answered by humility, quietly, patiently, and unpretentiously, yet unrelentingly pursuing the heart of God.