

5th Sunday of Easter “Navigating the Labyrinth”

Fr. Frank Schuster

Thomas asks Jesus, “How do we know the way to the Father’s Kingdom?” I love Thomas. I think he and I would get along. He is asking a very reasonable question. It is a question we all ask ourselves from time to time. “Lord, would you please give us directions.” Jesus responds, “I am the way and the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father except through me.”

This all reminds me of the Medieval Catholic spirituality called the labyrinth. You have all heard of this, haven’t you? You can find them in some of the old churches in Europe, and there is one or two here in the Pacific Northwest like at our Palisades Retreat Center. What is the labyrinth? Bishop Barron has a nice treatment of the labyrinth in his book *Heaven in Stone and Glass*. A labyrinth isn’t necessarily a maze made out of hedges, but rather a very twisty and turny path that eventually leads you to the center of the labyrinth representing our spiritual journey to Christ. The spiritual insight is, although modern culture will tell you that the quickest path from point A to point B is a straight line, the soul knows better. The quickest route to Christ isn’t a straight line. As people make their pilgrimage into the labyrinth, it happens sometimes that a person can find themselves at a bend or a curve and then begin to weep recognizing that the labyrinth represents their life’s story. A journey to know Jesus or ourselves for that matter is not a straight line. We know that life is a labyrinth with twists and turns. Like the Hebrews in the desert, it took them 40 years with a lot of detours, so it is in the spirit life.

And so, Thomas asks a very good question, how can we know our way to our Father’s house? The answer is a personal relationship with Jesus who is the way, the truth and the life. This begs the question: can you imagine life without Jesus? Over Holy Week, I gave a number of reflections on Pope Benedict’s encyclical *Spe Salvi*, Saved in Hope. For Pope Benedict, if we don’t believe in Jesus, we can only conclude that our lives come from nothing and will go back to nothing. And if that is the case, as we travel through the labyrinth of life, it really doesn’t matter which path you choose because all you have to ultimately look forward to what is under your feet, six feet under, and the accumulated pains and losses that lead up to that end. This hopelessness in the future can have an impact on our decision making in the present, in how we treat our world and our relationships.

This Easter season, we are confronted with the Risen Lord and we are blessed with the knowledge that our lives do not end in emptiness at all but rather, through Jesus, we can live eternally with God. Pope Benedict describes eternal life with God as diving into an ocean of infinite love. And so Jesus says to his disciples, “Do not let your hearts be troubled. You have faith in God; have faith also in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If there were not, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back again and take you to myself, so that where I am you also may be.” This is very good news for those who believe in Jesus because now we have hope. As we journey through the labyrinth of life, the knowledge that Jesus has an eternal home in mind for us can have a real impact on our choices in the here and now, on how we conduct ourselves in the world and how we treat the people in our lives.

Of course, what is the most frustrating feature of journeying through a maze? A fundamental feature of a maze is that we ultimately have to decide, do I go right or do I go left? Life is like that, isn't it? Every day we make our list of choices of what we are going to do today. However, there are also a number of gigantic moments in life when pivotal choices are made that dramatically affect the rest of our lives. It is amazing the choices young people are faced with as they approach graduation from school. Young people ask themselves questions like which school should I attend or which job should I train for? The decisions they make directly influence where they end up living, who they end up marrying, and the kids that are born as a result, or not as the case may be. It is truly amazing to reflect on the power of the choices we make during life.

However, the medieval labyrinth is different than a maze in that, although there are twists and turns that reflect life's choices, in a labyrinth there are only two directions, forwards towards Christ or backwards away from Christ. What this means for me is that the questions we find ourselves asking, like what am I going to do today, this week, this month, this year, for the rest of my life for that matter aren't always the best questions. The better questions as a disciple of Jesus are, where is Jesus sending me, where is Jesus leading me? These are better questions because Jesus is the way, the truth and the life, not me. Jesus has the power to save. I don't. My life choices should therefore lead me to Jesus and not away from him. The implication of this is, when I encounter a twist or turn in the labyrinth of my life, the best question is not "what do I want to do". It can seem like an innocent question, even a reasonable question. However, it can also at times be the worst question and can lead us in to all kinds of trouble. The better question is, "which choice leads me closer to Jesus"? Make sense?

And so, my friends, what is our relationship with Jesus like right now in our lives? Are we feeling distant from Jesus? St. Augustine argued passionately that Jesus is closer to us than we are to ourselves, so he is never distant! This means if we are feeling distant in our relationship with Jesus, it could be because we have wandered backwards instead of forwards in the labyrinth of the spirit life and found ourselves at the periphery walking in circles, distracted by worldly side shows and egotistic pursuits that in time all turn to dust. The invitation is to set our compass on Jesus at the heart of life's labyrinth because with Jesus our lives do not end in emptiness. Our life journey, with all the choices, twists and turns, has a destination and our Father's house has many dwelling places. And we will get there. My friends, we will get there if we set our eyes on Jesus who is the way the truth and the life.