

The Word of God . . . Through the Toilet Bowl

by Bob Ekblad

I serve as part-time chaplain to people who are in jail. Twice a week I make my way through five thick steel doors into the dreary center of Skagit County's high security facility. Guards let men who are interested in my Spanish Bible study out of their cells and pods, escorting them into the jail library and multipurpose room, where I await them.

Most of the Mexican and Chicano men I read the Bible with are in crisis. They are charged with various crimes. They are locked in small cells 18 hours a day for the months it often takes to go through the courts.

Many inmates feel completely cut off: Nobody will accept their collect calls and often nobody visits them during their limited visiting hours. Parents and girl friends often want nothing more to do with them after they've abused relationships by crazy drug and alcohol-induced behaviors. Some face years of prison time. Many face deportation by the Border Patrol.

When I have a new group or individual I have not met I often ask them:

"Do any of you sense that God is with you in any way? Do you hear God's voice to you here in the jail?"

People look down. Some are shaking their heads back and forth. "Nada," they often say. "No, I don't see or feel God."

I tell them that I believe that God is with them. I sympathize with the great difficulty involved in perceiving this invisible God. We read together that Sunday's reading:

"My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand. The Father and I are one."

You must be one of Jesus' sheep to hear his voice, says Jesus in today's Gospel. What does this mean? How do we become a sheep? This sounds even harder than being born again. I tell the men that there are ways to begin hearing God's voice right there in the jail.

"While you are here in this jail, it is my hope that you will come to see for yourself that God is with you, that God is for you," I tell them. "While this is not all up to you, it helps to learn to see and hear.

How might you hear this voice? In the same way that you are not a sheep, this may not be an actual voice. It may be something you feel or perceive deep inside. You may feel respected or cared for like never before. You may experience peace, or healing, or an exciting challenge. Following leads to more hearing as you come to know God, who is actively leading you.

Since God is leading, you might hear God's voice anywhere. You are more likely to be listening though when you are in a place of need, or brokenness.

I often get collect calls from people who I met in my jail Bible studies who are now in prison. Manny, a 24 year old guy has been calling me lately. He is in solitary confinement in Walla Walla State Penitentiary. When he calls I happen to be reading the beginning of Genesis:

"In the beginning, when God was creating the heavens and the earth, the earth was formless and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep."

Manny tells me he's really been depressed lately. He's felt submerged in darkness. I read him what I've just been reading, and point out that God is present in the darkness. God is creating.

"Do you feel God's Presence there with you Manny?" I ask.

"Yea man, I do," said Manny.

"What's it like?" I ask. "When do you feel it?"

"Well like today man. Today I felt it."

"Tell me about it," I said, "That is if you want to."

Manny told me how he and Pookie, another guy I know who happens to be in the solitary confinement cell on the floor directly above him, have been talking. He told me how they discovered that if they flush their toilets at the same time, emptying the water between them, they can talk through the toilet bowls.

He tells me that just that morning he had read a Psalm to Pookie.

"I read him the twenty-third Psalm. That's my favorite," said Manny. "It really touched him, man," continued Manny. "And it really touched me that it touched my brother."

I nearly drop the phone, as I too am hearing the voice of God as Manny spoke. The Greek word for voice, by the way is "phone."

"That is amazing," I tell him. "Do you know that in Genesis 1:2-3, the story continues: "The Spirit of God was hovering over the waters... and then God said: Let there be light."

"The Spirit of God was hovering over the waters of your toilet bowls!" I say, "and look, God spoke." Manny is blown away and I am too.

I try to imagine the good news that they were hearing their in their narrow cells, alone.

Try to imagine yourself right now in a solitary confinement cell of a big prison. Envision yourself hearing this Psalm through your toilet. What good news would you be hearing?

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff -- they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long (Psalm 23).

"My sheep hear my voice," says Jesus. These sheep include Manny, Pookie, you, me - even when we are straying or in dark places and finding faith impossible.

"I know them, and they follow me," continues Jesus. "I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand."

Manny and Pookie, you and me are safe in God's tender but firm grip. And God is so humble that he speaks even through the soiled mouth of toilet bowls.