Today’s propers offer us a variety of characteristics or aspects of God as presented in Holy Scripture. These are ways we have come to understand the divine nature.

Let’s take a stroll through the propers, starting with the Collect.

Already in that opening prayer we are given a view of Jesus, God as well as man in our understanding. The Collect presents him as self-sacrificing and setting an example for how to live. So—giver of the divine gift of sacrifice/forgiveness and model for our own lives.

In Jeremiah God speaks directly to the prophet, telling him (and us) that God is both near at hand and far off and that this intimate and remote God is not impressed with declarations of false prophets. Those are the ones who say, “I have dreamed, I have dreamed,” only to use that declaration for their own benefit and for infighting among themselves. Such easy declarations, God tells Jeremiah, are mere distractions from revelation of God’s true nature.

In the psalm God says “save the weak and the orphans; defend the humble and needy, rescue the weak and poor, delivering them from the wicked. God is defender of the defenseless and one who stands against those who would exploit the vulnerable.

Hebrews? A continuation of the author’s essay on faith. More about this in a minute.

Then in a kind of surprise, a seeming reversal, Luke records Jesus’ words, saying, “I came to bring fire and division to the world.” Not what we’ve been reading in the earlier readings, nor what we’ve come to expect from Jesus.

So this is the picture of God sketched out for us in the collect and first two readings: a supreme being, Spirit of the cosmos (a God far off) who is involved in the life of this world, in the life of each human being in it. This God is so involved as to enter the world as a human being, a man who is willing to sacrifice himself in order to save us from our sins, to save us from ourselves, to show us what a truly selfless and godly life is. Now that is a God “near by,” to use Jeremiah’s term.

This is the God whom the psalmist describes—even quotes—as being on the side of the weak, who favors the orphan, the humble, the needy, who stands against the wicked and rescues the weak and the poor from the hands of the wicked exploiter and oppressor.

God says, through the psalmist, that we are gods, even though we are mortal. Though there’s no explanation of our godly nature here, there is certainly an echo of our having been made in the image of God, of our being called to live out that selfless life modeled for us by Jesus.

What remains, then, is how to reconcile that message of fire and division in Jesus’ speech to his followers with these readings about advocacy and help for the helpless. And that comment I made about returning to the reading from Hebrews.

Jesus, I believe, is telling all of us who follow him that when it comes to siding with the poor—be they ragged, unkempt, disorderly—or with those who would exploit them for gain—be they urbane, well-presented and hyper-orderly—we are to side with those who have no one on their side. It can seem counterintuitive in a world, a culture, that prizes success above almost everything else.

My promised return to the theme of Hebrews? It’s that business of running with perseverance the race that is set before us. That is the definition of faith in today’s reading—faith endures in the example of Christ, even when—maybe especially when—that is not the popular thing to do. And the goal of the race is not some elusive heaven after we die, like the trophy at the end of a sprint, but the satisfaction of having run the race and finished. Much like the finisher’s award at the end of a marathon. We are the marathoners who receive the finisher’s medal for having run in good faith, striving to emulate those traits of God in Jesus as are set forth in today’s readings. Heaven is God’s business alone. We are simply to run the race, encouraging each other.

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