



Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers
From the clergy and members
of Holy Trinity Church
Forbes Park, Makati

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Title: **"Not a Tame Lion"**
Comment: Insert Comment here
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Readings for this Sunday:

First Reading Isaiah 35: 1-10
Second Reading James 5: 7-10
Gospel Matthew 11: 2-11

This weekend marked the end of the run of "Fiddler on the Roof" so my life can return to a degree of normalcy it hasn't had for many months. It was an overall good experience to be able to play Tevye in the play with Repertory Philippines, but it was also the hardest work I've had to do in many years in terms of stress, physical activity and overcoming fear. It also taught me a great deal. I don't mean just the research I did into Jewish life and customs, but also the things I had to learn about myself.

The various people involved in directing the piece didn't know me enough to completely trust that I would be able to pull off the character of Tevye. In fact, they were rather surprised about my difficulties with one aspect of the role: Tevye's intimate friendship with God. The directors kept telling me, "God is Tevye's best friend. You shouldn't have any problem with this. After all, you're a priest." I worried about that for some time. Why wasn't I conveying that relationship in my performance? Why did they think it was lacking? In the end, I did incorporate such a relationship in the way I handled the role, but I am also fully aware of the difference between acting and real life. I was still left with the question of why I had such a difficulty with the idea of intimacy with God.

Many people share this problem. We are all surrounded by religious hype concerning what a good, healthy relationship with God is supposed to be like that we lose track of what ours really is. We are told repeatedly that God is supposed to be someone we can talk to, share with, and confide in. In fact, some writers and preachers would have you think that unless you have this kind of "buddy-buddy" relationship with God, you don't really know God at all.

For some of us, though, it's not at all that simple. Our relationships with God are, after all, based on our human relationships, for good or ill. The terms we use, particularly such terms as "friendship" and "relationship" use human models. That is why some women who have had troubled relationships with their earthly fathers or men in general have difficulty addressing God as Father. The same holds true, by the way, with the attempt to call God "Mother" for those on the other side.

But whether or not there are dysfunctional aspects to our family histories, the issue also remains that everyone's experience of God is going to be different. There is no "one size fits all" relationship with God, and it therefore unfair to say that one person's experience is necessarily better than some else's. What is intimacy and friendship for some may well seem the height of presumption to others. For example, it doesn't occur to me to call God my "best friend". That seems just too limiting, and it subjects God to the unpredictable and limited nature of human relationships even at their best. Surely God is more than that. Surely God has to be more like...well, God!

I have had intimate, personal experiences of God, but they've probably not been what some people would categorize as "friendly." I have had moments of feeling the presence of God in my life in which the raw power of His presence has been felt, but they've been overwhelming, frightening, awe-inspiring, super-human...not the "warm fuzzies" of God as my friend, but dramatic reminders that God is God- almighty, wise, in control, just, and- yes, loving, but not in the limited, human way that so often seems sentimental rather than empowering. God's love at those moments reminds me of who it is that is in control, who it is that knows what its best, and who

it is that must never be taken for granted. It promises an intimacy unlike any I've ever known and given my experience with human beings, that's just the way I seem to need it to be!

That said, not everyone's image of God is helpful or particularly kind. The controversial novels of Philip Pullman known in the UK as "Northern Lights" and in the US as "His Dark Materials" are another case in point. The first novel, "The Golden Compass" has now been made into a film. Some commentators have felt it is anti-Christian or at least against the Catholic Church. My response is both yes and no: you certainly won't see the real controversial points in the first novel and the film, but by the third novel there is, indeed, a universal plot described to unseat a figure that is identified as God. This god is, however, not quite the same as the one we proclaim here. He is an old, spent figure, almost as much a part of creation as its creator- a figure known in philosophy and theology as the demiurge- less than an absolute deity and therefore subject to being overthrown. The author, in between counting his earnings from the books and the film, has been coy about saying whether his work is atheistic or agnostic. For my part, I found the books interesting, but also confused and disappointing- certainly never as good as the works of J.R.R. Tolkien or C.S. Lewis to which they are being compared. I wouldn't suggest that Pullman's books be read to children. I would suggest instead that the fantasy of Tolkien and the science-fiction of Lewis, like his three space novels, be read instead. However, Pullman's version of God does serve a purpose if only to throw into relief what the Judeo-Christian tradition has said about God all along- or rather the various views that the tradition has offered in its developing image of the ultimate Creator and Lord. And that image is not a single one, in fact, but a mosaic of personal experiences and views: one God, but myriad relationships.

Does one need to have an image of God as his or her "best friend" in order to have a personal relationship with Him? Does your relationship with God need to be the same as mine or fit the description in devotional books and the witness of preachers and evangelists? Not if God is going to remain God- both above and beyond us, and also within and through us as only a true God could be, and not the figment of our imagination and longing.

It is not Philip Pullman that I wish to quote in closing, but C.S. Lewis, whose fictional character, the fawn Mr. Tumnus makes what for me is one of the most telling descriptions of that mysterious figure in the Narnia books. He says, "...After all, Aslan is not a tame lion." And that ties back into the event that we anticipate this Advent season and that we will celebrate in little more than a week. God-Made-Man, God-With-Us, Emmanuel, Jesus the Christ came into the world to show us what God is like, not to give us a user-friendly, kinder and gentler alternative. His teachings are demanding, sometimes shocking, often uncomfortable. His presence, both in Scripture and Sacrament and in our own lives as Christians, is not always that of a "best friend" but that doesn't mean it's less than intimate, less than healing, less than empowering. In fact, Jesus is a whole lot like God in human form. And that's the whole idea, isn't it- not only of Christmas, but of the Christian faith as a whole.

Don't worry, in other words, if your relationship with God isn't exactly like everyone else's. It's supposed to be personal, intimate, and unique...just like you, and just like God.