



## 08/23/2020 Divine Sculptures

Isaiah 51:1-6; Psalm 138:1-8; Romans 12:1-8; Matthew 16:13-20

A plumber looks at a block of stone and makes a sink out of it. But an artist... To an artist's eyes the stone hides beauty. Renaissance sculptor, Michelangelo is known to have said: "The sculpture is already complete within the marble block before I start my work. It is already there; I just have to chisel away the superfluous material." And in another occasion: "I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free." The artist's obsessive process of selecting marble for his projects drove him year after year to the town of Carrara, near Pisa, where quarries that date back to Roman times are legendary for their pure white marble block. He spent months in the quarry to find the perfect stone for a subject often delaying the start of his project and the delivery date.

God also invites the Israelites to take their "quarry" of origin seriously. Consider God's remarks as reported by Isaiah: "Listen to me, you that pursue righteousness, you that seek the Lord. Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug. Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who bore you." In other words, know where you come from, know the history of your people's intersection with God and how God has been present all along and has revealed God's way and decrees. Isaiah points to Abraham and Sarah as the beginning of the blessings that produce much faith. The relationship of Israel with God is an intricate story of intimacy, betrayal, forgiveness, comfort, and renewal. It is a daily journey of faithfulness, wonder, setbacks, trials, and temptations to overcome, joys and sorrows, determination and courageous love, undeterred hope, and fearless trust.

Considering the large number of saints who have preceded us and their modeling of the faith aids all those who "pursue righteousness and seek the Lord" (Is. 51:2).<sup>1</sup> There is no righteousness absent a strong and healthy relationship with God. It is such a strong relationship that allows Israel to hear the comforting words spoken by God: her ruins will be transformed in a garden and there will be joy, gladness, singing and thanksgiving (Is. 51:3). It is the teachings of the Lord that will bring God's eternal salvation: The Earth and the heavens will be no more, but the Word of the Lord will remain forever.<sup>2</sup>

The love of the Lord, that our ancestors in the faith have witnessed to, keeps us strong and firm on the path. Dorothy Day<sup>3</sup>, Dietrich Bonhoeffer<sup>4</sup>, Martin Luther King, Jr., just to name a few saints closer to us, concretely embodied love and faithfulness in the face of trial and tragedy. Not so much the love and faithfulness of our ancestors for God, although that is edifying also, but the love and faithfulness of God to us when all seems lost and hopeless; when the world is on fire with cruelty and death all around; when

---

<sup>1</sup> Consider also Hebrews 12:1

<sup>2</sup> See Matthew 24:35

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RKiLCDaCAOU>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.dbonhoeffer.org/>; <https://vimeo.com/355652917>



### 08/23/2020 Divine Sculptures

Isaiah 51:1-6; Psalm 138:1-8; Romans 12:1-8; Matthew 16:13-20

truth and justice are mocked with lies and abuse of power; when honesty, empathy, and compassion seem to have all but disappeared, God's love and faithfulness remains, perhaps unseen to the untrained eyes, in the midst of chaos. That is what gives hope and comforts us.

But for us to see God we need to be attuned to God. That is not something that comes naturally or easily. It is a gift generated by God's self-revelation: God takes the first step of reaching out to us.<sup>5</sup> The desire to love God has been put into our heart by God's love to start with. We love what we know. Once Love has found us, we are blessed indeed if we do not let that go us by without noticing it, without reaching out for it, without developing a strong desire to remain in covenantal love with God. Such is the biblical invitation to seek God and rest in God's grace.<sup>6</sup>

In the time of Jesus, a grotto where the god Pan was worshiped was located prominently in Caesarea Philippi. On the cliff walls adjacent to that grotto were any number of niches holding images of other gods. It was a place where many different gods were worshiped. In this context, Jesus asks the disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter's confession of faith is even more powerful because of where Jesus and his disciples are gathered. His personal confession can be interpreted as representative of the rest of the disciples' sentiments. By the grace of God, we all get to give that confession.

Jesus highlights Peter's insight as something that cannot come from "flesh and blood"<sup>7</sup> but generates by necessity from a deeper well: a truth revealed by God. To get to that truth one needs sharpened listening skills. To possess that truth is a blessing that liberates.<sup>8</sup>

Obviously, it helps to have models of faith to look at. The saints who have preceded us, those who came before Jesus and those who came after, are a powerful reference point in times of despair, helplessness, and spiritual disorientation. We look at them to be edified and encouraged. We see their election to be friends of God not because they were special but because God never gave up on them, and in their human limitations and failings they learned how to look for that divine spark that gave them faith and listen for that inner whisper that gave them voice.

---

<sup>5</sup> 1 John 1:4:19; 1 Corinthians 13:4-8

<sup>6</sup> Isaiah 55:6; Psalm 105:4; Psalm 63:1-3; Jeremiah 29:13; Matthew 7:7-8; Numbers 6:24-26

<sup>7</sup> Paul alludes to this spiritual insight when he says we cannot "get" the kingdom through earthly reasoning (see 1 Corinthians 15:50).

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 5:8. John puts it in terms of possessing eternal life (see John 17:3)



### 08/23/2020 Divine Sculptures

Isaiah 51:1-6; Psalm 138:1-8; Romans 12:1-8; Matthew 16:13-20

When we discover the image of God in us, (you know, God reflecting God's image in us,) we are astonished that God would want us as the mirror into which God can check Godself out. Such an honor...what a high call!

And we are fortunate enough to have Jesus in our life, asking us: "And you, who do you say I am?" My response will identify me as one who is Jesus' disciple...or not; a member of the Church founded on the rock of truth spoken by Peter...or not; a lover of the Way, the Truth, and the Life...or not. With a positive response to Jesus' question, I am on my way to build on solid ground, honor God and live under God's rule. But when I reply with a negative response, I am a child of God nonetheless but with smudges on the mirror so greasy that the image of God is all but deformed and out of shape and struggles to come through.

So, what if the Church Jesus has in mind is connected to that original quarry from which we all were sculpted? What if God has already in mind what will come out of the chaotic and shapeless mess our society and the rest of the world finds itself in? What if we dropped real down in ourselves and payed attention to the whisper of God calling us to greater love, to become "a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is our spiritual worship"? What if we were "transformed by the renewing of our mind" in order to discern the will of God for us? Would we notice the despair of our siblings of color disproportionately affected by the coronavirus? Would we pay attention to the anguish of those who flee in terror from crime and starvation in their home countries? Would we be touched by the fear, the frustration, and the uncertainty of those who are forced to choose between sending their children to school and go to work or keep them home and lose their source of income?

The pandemic has confirmed our understanding that the Church is not the building but the people who gather around the Word of God and commune with that Word through bread and wine for the purpose of becoming living bread for the world. Can we picture in our mind what the world might see if we each clearly reflected the image of God in us? Can you see the sculpture of a new world reconciled with God taking shape as people become more aware of the inequalities in our society? How could we cooperate to alleviate the suffering of our neighbors? We are pretty good at addressing the immediate needs of the hungry with a warm plate, but how could we use our collective voice and electoral power to turn around the social constructs that create the poor? Jesus has given to Peter and to the Church keys to lock up or unlock the spiritual powers that could create new possibilities for a just society reconciled with God. Those keys are not to be kept in our pockets. They are to be used. Let us not underestimate the spiritual strength of this mandate of Jesus.



**08/23/2020 Divine Sculptures**

Isaiah 51:1-6; Psalm 138:1-8; Romans 12:1-8; Matthew 16:13-20

May our hearts be softened, and our steadfastness strengthened to obey the will of God that calls us to be one Body in Christ, each of us endowed with gifts for the common good. Amen.