

THE ARROW WITHIN

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Jesus said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6)

The Pope has been addressing many issues of great importance during his visit to New York City: the war in Iraq, ecumenical relations, human rights concerns, and the clergy sex abuse scandal to name a few. One topic he won't likely be touching on is this: What has become of the great American sport of bowling? The Pope won't go near that one, not even in his Pope mobile, so I will. I ask again: What has become of the great American sport of bowling?

A few weeks ago I took one of my sons bowling for his birthday. Bowling on your birthday is a longstanding tradition in the Waring family, dating all the way back to when I was a child. In those days bowling alleys were brightly lit places that echoed with the distinctive sound of crashing pins. When you checked in you received a score sheet and a pencil. You found your own way to the lane assigned to you. You learned how to keep score. You practiced the etiquette of not distracting the bowler next to you. You concentrated on knocking down as many pins as possible. That was then.

This is now. Bowling today is three things: It is loud. It is lewd. It is dark. We arrived at a local alley and were immediately taken under the wing of a teenage employee named Todd, our attendant who would bring us food, beverages, whatever we needed. He fetched us each a ball. He turned on the overhead computer that would keep score for us. As he spoke I could barely hear him because of the unbelievably loud and pounding music playing at all times. At the end of each lane above the pins is a screen flashing psychedelic scenes and videos of scantily clad pop singers and other ruffians from the marketplace. I could tell that one was Britney Spears. Another was a lovely hip-hop artist alluringly splayed on a bed. Most distressing of all, it's dark. The only lights on seem to be infrared. The pins glow, but when it's time to bowl, no longer can you see those little arrows imbedded in the lane to guide you. I've never been a great bowler, but I learned early on to aim for the arrows about a third of the way down the lane. Forget about the far-away pins, aim for the correct arrow and the ball will take care of the pins. I really like those arrows. These days you can't find the arrows. At one point Todd came by and asked if we needed anything. I said, "Todd, how about turning off the music and turning on the lights?" Todd said no. Todd would not do whatever I needed. And so I ask, What has become of the great American sport of bowling?

In today's reading from the Gospel of John (14:1-14), the disciples of Jesus are having trouble seeing the arrows. The setting is the upper room of a house in Jerusalem. It is the Passover meal on the night before Jesus died. Throughout the evening Jesus had been saying and doing things that the disciples simply couldn't understand. He'd washed their feet. He'd declared one of them would betray him, and then dismissed Judas into the night. He'd explained how he was going to depart for a place where they could not follow. All these confusing sayings and symbolic actions form the backdrop of what Jesus said next: "Let not your hearts be troubled."

The disciples' hearts were understandably troubled. To this point they'd given three years of their life to following Jesus, and now it was all suddenly unraveling before their eyes. They had hoped that Jesus was the Messiah whom God would send to take his place as the rightful King of Israel. You see, their hopes for Jesus were decidedly political, not unlike how a dedicated inner circle of campaign workers today have hopes for their candidate. The disciples wanted Jesus to be King of Israel. The march to Jerusalem had been long, but when they arrived it must have seemed that it was all coming together; their candidate was in the right place with the necessary support to make his move. And what was his move? His move was to announce that he was leaving. It was to implode at the critical moment of the campaign. In today's reading Thomas and Philip are particularly perplexed and frustrated. They didn't know where Jesus was going. They didn't know how, or even if, they could follow him. They didn't know how his leaving could possibly accomplish their objectives. It was as if the lights went out and all the arrows that had guided their path suddenly blinked out of sight.

This brings me back to bowling. Perhaps in a round-about way, the Pope is talking about bowling after all. What's happened to bowling these days is a parable of what happens in every generation. The times change, new issues emerge, and people either can't see the familiar arrows that have guided us in the past, or don't know how to make use of them, or never learned that they were there at all. We're bowling in the dark, totally distracted, totally frustrated, unsure of what we're supposed to do. Back in the 1950's my mother was an elementary school teacher in New Jersey. She remembers a little boy named Jimmy who was about four-years old when she first met him. Jimmy came from a terribly dysfunctional family, and during the day his mother would simply leave him at the school playground while she presumably went off to work. Jimmy was too young to attend the school, but he would occasionally sneak inside the building and try to join in with a class. Many a time he would burst into my mother's classroom and yell, "*What we posed to do?*" Little Jimmy didn't know it, but he speaks for all of us; his was a question of great importance that every generation has to face. What are we supposed to do? What is the right path to follow?

Many of you will remember the popular set of letters, WWJD, that people offered up a few years ago as a way to shine a light on situations of moral and political darkness. The four letters stand for: What Would Jesus Do? In every situation, ask, What Would Jesus Do? and you will know what you are supposed to do. Will it work? I was once witness to a group discussion in which a woman thought she could help combat global warming with a slight rephrasing of the question. What Would Jesus Drive? she cleverly asked. Her theory was that Jesus, of course, would drive the most environmentally responsible car possible. If it didn't run on solar power, then at least it would be a compact hybrid. That's what Jesus would drive, and that's what we should drive, she concluded. Another group member begged to disagree. Jesus, he surmised, would drive a large, 4-wheel drive SUV with a gun rack. The woman gasped, "*Whatever* do you mean?" The man explained that since wherever Jesus went he carted around his 12 disciples, he would need a vehicle capable of seating thirteen people. What is more, they would have to bump along some pretty bad roads; he'd need the 4-wheel drive. "But why the gun rack?" asked the woman. "That's where they'd all keep their shepherd's staffs," said the man. "Ah," said yet a third person, "one of you is following the Jesus of history, and one of you the Christ of faith." By then I think Jesus would have driven anything he could find to get away from that particular discussion group!

What are we supposed to do? Where are the arrows that point the way forward? Is a little guidance too much to ask of God? It is not too much to ask. I believe that God takes a loving interest in how we live our daily lives. To be sure, God leaves us with enormous freedom to make choices that are good and bad. But in all those choices God has a loving concern, especially because the choices we make can affect our communion and closeness with God's presence. Does God coerce us along his predetermined ways? Never. Does God lead us and guide us along right pathways for his name's sake. Yes. But how do we know God's ways?

Here is where I believe we need to take a close look at the words that Jesus spoke to the disciples. This will take some getting through, so bear with me. Listen to the exchange: Jesus said to them, "you know the way to the place where I am going." Thomas responded, "Lord, we don't know where you are going; how can we know the way?" Jesus said to Thomas, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also." Biblical scholars point out to us that when Thomas here talked about knowing, he meant the type of knowledge that we can acquire outwardly with our five senses. It's very true to Thomas. Remember, this was the disciple who would not believe in the risen Jesus unless he could physically touch his wounds. For Thomas, to know something was to see it or touch it literally. But when Jesus responded to Thomas we find a much different word for knowing. Jesus talked about a deeper knowledge that results from prolonged, close, intimate experience. It's the same when Philip said to Jesus, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." Philip wanted to see with his two eyes. But once again Jesus responded on a deeper level, referring to a knowing, a perceiving that transcends the five physical senses.

What are we supposed to do? Where are the arrows? Show us the Father. With his answer Jesus chided Philip, but at the same time directed him where to look: *Have I been with you so long, and yet you do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?*" The challenge to Philip and Thomas is also the challenge to you and to me. We look for signs and wonders. We wait for audible voices, parted seas, claps of thunder, stars in the sky to direct us. But here is the challenge to look within for the arrows of God's presence and guidance. It is the challenge to sink down to the center of your soul and connect with the indwelling Spirit of Christ who is alive in you. Christ is risen. Jesus lives. The most immediate experience of his living presence is by the power of the Spirit dwelling in you. Paul would ask the Corinthians, *Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? (1 Cor. 3:16)*. Lest you think that I am advocating a highly privatized, individualistic approach to faith and morals in which you can write your own creed and follow your own rules, I am not. Trusted authority figures, faith communities, religious institutions, even the Pope himself can all serve to illuminate the arrow within, and help us connect with the indwelling Spirit of God. Indeed, wherever two or three are gathered together, there he is in the midst of them. But ultimately, no one can double up for you when it comes to a personal encounter with the living God.

Let me share with you how I learned all this anew the other day at the bowling alley. I could not see the arrows. I was bowling a perfectly awful game. Of course I was having a blast with my son, and that's what mattered the most. But being the competitive person that I am, I also wanted to knock down as many pins as I could. What I finally did each time before I rolled the ball was to walk all the way up to the line where the actual lane begins. I would peer through the loud and lewd darkness for as long as it took until I located the arrow that I needed. I had to fix it in my mind, and feel it in my soul. Then with my eye still on it I would back away to the starting place, and without averting my gaze begin my motion. As I said before, I am not now, nor have I ever been, nor will I ever be a great bowler. But with my inner eye and heart surely fixed on the arrow, the path became straight and more pins fell.

Jesus said, “*Let not your hearts be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me.*” Draw near to God and peer within through the clamor of your soul. Fix your gaze on the Spirit of Christ, who lives and leads and dwells within you. He is the way, and the truth, and the life. He is the arrow within.

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Some thoughts and phrases inspired by John A. Sanford, Mystical Christianity, Crossroad, 1994.