

Whether it's sports or theater, movies or music, art or nature, we all enjoy a little magic now and then. Whatever your preference, things that make the world feel more alive and engaging are part of what makes life so enjoyable. You can choose your diversion and the extent of your participation, and if you find that one doesn't do it for you anymore, you can choose another, no harm, no foul. Magic, for lack of a better word, does have a place in our lives, but it can never take the place of God.

Yet in every age, the temptation to replace God with things we can control appears, albeit in different forms. The danger, though, is the same. For one thing, only God can give us true purpose, assurance, forgiveness, and salvation, and God is the one ultimate source of life, peace, joy, and love. For another, you don't need to turn to fantasy fiction to see examples people who thought they could control magic becoming controlled by it, sometimes being suddenly overwhelmed and sometimes, even scarier, being corrupted so slowly that the change in the balance of power is evident only after it's too late.

St. Paul was dealing with an extreme version of this problem. While some members of the Church at Corinth were mature Christians, others had just recently converted from paganism. Those are the people Paul refers to as "those weak believers," which sounds less than pastoral to us, but they would have recognized the term as a sign of Paul's protective affection. "The weak" would have been tempted to return to pagan belief and practice, which was tempting not just because it was familiar and popular, but also because in those days, some of the best food in town was to be had at pagan temples. When we talked about this passage at Bible study, I struggled to think of a suitable modern analog for the situation.

Fortunately at the diocesan convocation yesterday, Bishop Benhase came up with the analogy of drinking in the presence of people who are new to recovery. While yes, he said, he enjoys a good Scotch, and he has every right in the world to enjoy it, when he knows he's in the presence of someone whose sobriety would be threatened if he were to drink in front of them, he chooses to abstain, not out of obligation, but out of love. Love shows him that the other person's health is more important than his own indulgence, and sometimes living in love requires a sacrifice.

But other struggles are more subtle. Human beings have all sorts of ways of resisting God's will for us, even though his will for us is always love. Today's Gospel highlights the difference between divine prerogative and human manipulation in two fundamental ways. The first is in teaching. In Jesus's day, it was normal for any educated person to be invited to teach in the synagogue, and common for those teachings to be based wholly or in part upon earlier teachings. That wasn't such a bad thing, since it diminished the chance of one person veering off course with an appealing, but false, teaching, and allowed new ideas to grow organically, developing in harmony with established ones and being tested by a thoughtful community.

But the trouble came when the teachers of those ideas sought more and more

prestige and power, implicitly equating their inherited body of teaching and tradition with divine revelation. When the real thing appeared in their midst, how do you think the established teachers reacted? The word Mark uses to describe what set Jesus apart from the other teachers, which is translated for us here as “authority,” is the same Greek word that the Nicene Creed uses to describe the essence of God, and there it is translated as “being.” So the same being who inspired the writers of scripture and who commanded the existence of all things was speaking in the midst of the people of God.

The second distinction Mark shows us between divine and human activity is in Jesus’s response to the possessed man who interrupts the service. Mark’s original readers would have been familiar with healers who used elaborate rituals of their own invention or of folkloric imagination in an attempt to drive out evil spirits. Again, Jesus shows the difference between “magic” devised by human beings and the power of God. All he has to do is give the command, for again he speaks in the same voice that spoke to create the universe and commanded the rebellious angels to be cast out of heaven. And so with a word, evil is put to flight, and the goodness and order of creation are restored. Again, those who witnessed the ministry of Jesus understood who he was, saw that he was set apart from the world even as he was part of it. By his words and his deeds, Jesus revealed his true nature, authority giving grace to the world.

At first we might wonder why anyone would prefer human rituals when the ways of God are so clearly superior. But we know only too well. The ways of the world are more familiar and they are on our level, our scale, subject to our control, at least in part, or in theory. They can be incredibly alluring and may promise all manner of things to us. Even the most committed, mature Christians can feel the pull of earthly magic from time to time, tempting us to call upon made or made-up things to take the place of God.

Bishop Benhase’s remarks reminded me of a modern-day example that is remarkably close to the struggle that Paul’s weak believers experienced. I should have thought of this at Bible study, but a few years ago, I met someone who was coming back to the Church after spending many years worshipping pagan deities and participating in occult rituals. She believed that doing those things had made her a target of demonic attack, and she was terrified. I prayed with her, counseled her, and assured her that now that she had come back to the enthusiastic practice of the Christian faith, she would be fine, because God is far stronger than all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God. But she still felt so threatened that she couldn’t consume any media that featured anything supernatural, not even Harry Potter, which draws so heavily on Christian themes. And like Paul’s weak Christians, I met her where she was, confident that she would grow in faith, in her own time.

That was an extreme example, but all of us need the regular experience of grounding, formation, inspiration, and encouragement that the Church provides, in order that we might not be deceived by anything that might separate us from God, natural or supernatural, and instead perceive the right relationship between Creator and creation,

and live accordingly. We worship God together not because it will get God to do things for us; God is not a service, but a person who loves us like the best parent we could ever have. God blesses us abundantly out of pure love for us, and we respond with worship because our hearts are glad, and open, and grateful, and because we know that God, and God alone, is worthy of our worship.

Since everyone's relationship with God is more important than anything else, and certainly more important than our individual rights and preferences, accept nothing less than the fullness of God, word and wisdom, life and light. And since God has dealt so graciously with us, deal graciously with the people you encounter, meet them where they are, and be willing to sacrifice a drink or a movie or whatever else will help them to grow closer to God. Our relationships with God give us more and greater things than all the magic of the world, which vanishes like a puff of smoke.