

All Souls

Nov. 2, 2008

INTRODUCTION: Our first reading, from the book of Maccabees, comes from about 100 years before Christ. At that time in history the Greeks were the dominant power and they were trying to get the Jews to abandon their faith and follow the beliefs of the pagans. Those who would not give in were persecuted and put to death. The loyal Jews fought back. In one of their battles, many Jews were killed. As they were being buried, it was found that they had small statues of pagan gods attached to their garments. These Jews were loyal to their Jewish beliefs, but they had, to some extent, given in to paganism. Just in case those pagan gods were real, they were carrying with them statues of pagan gods to give them protection. Their leader, Judas Maccabeus, took up a collection to send to Jerusalem for sacrifices to be offered up to the Lord for those people. He believed their hearts were, in general, in the right place, but for the weakness in their faith they had to be forgiven. In this piece of history from 100 B.C., we can see the beginnings of the belief that our prayers can help those who have died, a belief that is still part of our faith.

HOMILY: Praying for our deceased relatives and friends is what our feast of All Souls is about today. However, I had the hardest time getting started with today's homily. I kept putting it off. It's not as if I do not believe in praying for friends and relatives who have died. I do it all the time and it has been a tradition in the Church from the beginning, and even before that as we heard in our first reading.

I think the difficulty I had in developing my homily comes from two sources. First, many people don't like to hear about death and what might come afterwards. We know we can't avoid it, but my sense is that many people believe that if they don't think about it, it won't happen, at least not for a long time. My suspicion is that my father was that way. I constantly tried to get him to make a will but he never did. As a CPA he would have known it was a good idea. I think making a will would have made the prospect of his own death too concrete and too real for him to deal with.

The second reason today's homily was hard was that I would have to talk about Purgatory. It's an idea that many Christians deny. I remember once I was helping a family prepare the liturgy for their deceased father and they insisted "absolutely no mention of Purgatory." It's as if it were a bad word. They wanted to think their father was perfect, I guess, and was already in heaven. Most of us would like to believe that our loved ones go straight to heaven when they die - period. If this were true, then they would not need our prayers. If they went to the other place, God forbid, our prayers would do them no good. The Church teaches, in every Mass we have for a person who died and in today's feast, that our prayers do help our relatives and friends who have left this world as they journey to eternal life.

Purgatory, among all the mysteries and beliefs of the Church is an extremely logical and comforting doctrine. It's logical if we ask ourselves how many of us think we will be perfect when

we die. There may even be some who are perfect right now. I would ask them to identify themselves, but if they're perfect, they will also be too humble to do so. Even those who lived a good life may still have a little room for improvement, they may still not love God or others quite enough. That's where Purgatory comes in – it's an opportunity to grow into the most loving, most holy person we can possibly be. As a result we would then be filled with God's peace and joy and love to the fullest extent. Luther rejected the idea of Purgatory because of the abuse of indulgences at the time. Today, the concept of Purgatory has been rejected by many because of all the negative images of suffering and punishment that we grew up with. Actually, I think for the souls in Purgatory, happiness far outweighs the unhappiness. Their salvation is sure, they are more closely united with God than they had ever experienced before in their lives, they are on their way to the enjoyment of God's kingdom in the fullest possible way. But they're not there yet and that's the painful part.

If you read the book, "The Five People You Meet in Heaven," I think you get a good, practical image of Purgatory. It's not a religious book, it's very entertaining and it pictured for me what Purgatory might be like as we work out issues, regrets, hurts, conflicts, etc., that we might take with us when we die.

To demonstrate that Purgatory makes so much sense, I think that those who deny Purgatory have had to find a substitute for it in their thinking about the next life. For many that substitute is reincarnation. In reincarnation a person supposedly keeps working for greater and greater purity and holiness until they are ready to be perfectly one with God. However, reincarnation comes from Hinduism. Actually a Hindu does not look forward to reincarnation because they don't want to have to pass through this world of pain and suffering one more time. I suspect the notion of reincarnation has been adopted by many Westerners, even Christians, because it fits our culture of "buy now, pay later." They figure they can live any way they want and can postpone having to pay any consequences. Our faith tells us, "now is the acceptable time, now is the day of salvation." God gives us what we need in this life to help us know him and serve him in this life. If we do not do it perfectly, Purgatory is there to finish the job. Today, we renew our faith in life after death. Today too we renew our belief in the power of prayer to help our loved ones, even those who are no longer among us, for in Christ they are still one with us. With Christ our great high priest, we offer now the greatest prayer there is, the Eucharist.

Dedication of St. John Lateran

Nov. 9, 2008

INTRODUCTION

The celebration of the dedication of the Church of St. John Lateran in Rome is a universal feast of the Church. It is the oldest Catholic Church in Rome and it is the Cathedral Church of the Holy Father. Actually the popes lived there for 1000 years and it is still considered the Pope's cathedral. In a sense it symbolizes all existing churches in the world today.

Our first reading is a vision of the prophet Ezekiel who had lots of visions and recorded them. At the time this vision took place, Jerusalem and its Temple had been destroyed by the Babylonians. The prophet sees that one day the city would be restored and the temple would be rebuilt. It is an idealized temple he sees. There is a stream of water flowing from the temple, flowing east and south toward the desert of the Arabah and into the Dead Sea. The water in the Dead Sea is seven times more salty than the ocean and nothing can live in it. In Ezekiel's vision, however, the water that flows from the temple gives life to everything it comes in contact with and even makes the Dead Sea into fresh water. The meaning is that what flows from God's house, prayer and sacrifice and worship is life giving. The book of Revelations takes up this image, for the vision is still waiting to be fulfilled.

HOMILY

Buildings are important not just to keep us warm and dry. They are important for many, many reasons. Winston Churchill said it so clearly when London had to be rebuilt after the World War II. "We shape our buildings then our buildings shape our lives." Today we celebrate the dedication of a church building. A church building is a holy place, a place where God's people gather for prayer and worship and sacrifice. Jesus' reaction to the abuses in the Temple shows us God's house should be treated as a holy place.

But a church building is important not just because God is there but because we are. A church building is called a church only because it is where the Church gathers and prays and celebrates God's saving love. Without the gathering of God's people, it would not be a church, even if it were the most beautiful building ever built. Today's celebration reminds us the Church is first and foremost the community of God's people, for the Church existed for almost 300 years before the first building was built. Before then the Church met in people's homes or during times of persecution they met in catacombs in order to pray and celebrate the Eucharist. Notice that gathering together was so important that the early Christians would risk their lives in order to do so. When Constantine became emperor he issued the edict of toleration thus ending the persecution. It was he who built St. John Lateran. So today's commemoration of St. John Lateran is a feast worth celebrating; it's also a feast reminding us that Church is more than a place to go. It is all of us who gather together here or anywhere else God's people come together to pray.

So many people today claim to belong to a Church, but they are seldom there. I think they deceive themselves to say they belong to a Church unless they belong to the gathering of God's people. That's what Church really is. In the second reading St. Paul says, "You are God's building." Those who are physically unable to be part of the gathering because of sickness or infirmity are still connected with us through the Eucharist our Communion ministers take to them each week. Belonging to a Church is more than having your name on a church's roster or in the church's computer. Being part of a church involves more than simply believing in Christ. St. James tells us the devils also believe...and tremble with fear. (James 2,19) Later on in his letter, Paul uses another example to show that following Christ means being part of a community of believers. He tells us we are all members of Christ's body and we need to be united and work

together as one. Certainly, coming together in prayer and worship is an expression of our oneness in Christ. (It would be nice if we showed this oneness by coming closer to the altar when we come to pray and not spread all over church. But that's another issue.)

Sometimes it's hard to be part of a community each week. We can all find reasons why we're too busy to get to church. We live in a society that promotes the attitude that we can make up our own rules. When we're part of a community, not everyone is as perfect as we are. There are scandals and there is hypocrisy in the Church. I always remind people of the statement by Fr. Greeley: "If you ever find a perfect church, by all means join it. Just know that once you join it, it will no longer be perfect." The Church has been scarred with failures and sins from the time Judas betrayed Christ and Peter denied him. But Christ hasn't given up on his Church and continues to be with us and to call us to holiness. He promised he will be with us always until the end of time. We continue to offer our prayers asking God to bless us as his people gathered in faith. Amen.

33rd Ordinary

November 16, 2008

With the economy the way it is today, there is the temptation to be like the man in today's gospel and bury whatever we might have left of our assets in some safe place. I remain hopeful that what I read about things getting better will be correct. Our story, however, is not about how we should invest our money but how to invest our lives. The only safe investment is to invest our lives in God and to live our faith as best we can.

When we hear the word talent, we automatically think of some special gift, like writing poetry or singing or drawing or playing sports. In today's parable the talents the master gave his servants were indeed special gifts, but in the vocabulary of the ancients it referred to a specific weight – 60 to 80 pounds of gold or silver. Our word "talent" comes from the Greek word *talanton*. Jesus doesn't tell us what the metal was, but it would indeed have been a special gift.

The third man, the man with the one talent, said he was too afraid of his boss to risk investing it. The thought struck me that maybe the other two had just as much fear of their master and that's what motivated them to do something with the talents they had been given. Fear is not always bad. Sometimes it motivates us to action rather than immobilize us. That idea might be an interesting topic for some other time.

What I want to tell you today is what you already know. If we work hard, we will be more likely to succeed in life than if we don't! Outside circumstances (which we call luck: good or bad) can affect our efforts, but for the most part we get out of life what we put into it. That's a no-brainer.

Jesus is telling us that our eternal happiness works the same way. We will get out of our

spiritual life what we put into it. Too many people today hear only what they want to hear in the gospel. They enjoy hearing all about God's mercy and love, but they tend to ignore the places where Jesus tells us about our responsibilities. Today's parable tells us heaven is not a freebie and it's not automatic. If it were, why did Jesus need to come to us in the first place. Why did he teach us how to live and stress the importance of prayer and doing good works? Grace is indeed a gift, but if we don't use the graces and gifts and love God offers us, we will lose them. It's just like any talent we can think of - if we don't use it, it does us no good to have it. God can't save us without our cooperation. If his parable doesn't tell us that, it doesn't tell us anything.

We've all put time and energy into something and been disappointed. It may have been an investment, it may have been a relationship, it may have been anything at all. When that happens we may shy away from risking disappointment again. But even though the world can disappoint us, God will not.

Faith in our Lord will not disappoint, but it will not bring payoffs every time we pray or do something good. If that were to happen, faith would be unnecessary. The reason we need faith is because we are not always immediately blessed for some good thing we do. When we are, that's great. When we're not, we just have to trust that God will not let us down in the end. Notice in the parable, the servants who invested their gift and increased its value received a reward that greatly outweighed the original gift, but they didn't receive it until the master returned. The kingdom of heaven will be greater than anything we can imagine and will far outweigh any good thing we are able to do, but we have to wait for it with faith and hope.

Our Mass reminds us of how we have been blessed, it reminds us of our responsibilities, it encourages us to remain faithful. It not only encourages us, the Mass is the greatest prayer we have. As a prayer it helps us to use well the gifts God has given us, especially the gift of his grace. Amen.

Christ the King

Nov. 23, 2008

INTRODUCTION: (Ezekiel 34, 11-12. 15-17; I Cor. 15, 20-26.28; Matthew 25, 31-46) Today we honor Christ as our King. Our scripture readings do not picture him as a typical king. In our first reading Ezekiel, the prophet, pictures God as a shepherd. God is distressed with the shepherds of his people; i.e., the kings and religious leaders. They led God's people away from God and to eventual disaster when the Babylonians invaded. God said he would lead them rightly. We see this prophecy perfectly fulfilled in Jesus. In our second reading St. Paul is writing on the topic of the resurrection. Paul tells us the risen Jesus will reign until all evil in the world is destroyed, even death, and then he will turn the kingdom over to the Father. In the gospel Jesus is pictured as a judge, a judge who judges us on how we behave toward the lowly and the poor. Thus we have three images of Christ the King: a shepherd, the risen Lord and the judge of all nations.

HOMILY: This past week I was asked to speak to the students in one of our local high schools. The topic was Judaism. It was an interesting experience being back in the classroom. Unfortunately they were not as excited about Jewish history as I am. I put half the students to sleep and said to the teacher as I was leaving, "I'm sorry I put many of your students to sleep." He said, "that's all right. I do it every day as well." In reading about Judaism I came across a story about two rabbis who were walking together. They were approached by a non-believer who was interested in perhaps joining the Jewish religion. He said to the two rabbis, "can you teach me all I need to know about being a Jew while I stand on one foot?" The one rabbi thought it was a trivial and irreverent question and hit him with his cane for asking it. The other rabbi said it can be done. He told him this is the essence of the law: "Do not do unto others what you would not have them do unto you." He added, "the rest is commentary, but study the rest as well."

The second rabbi was very wise in getting to the heart of the matter. There is One even wiser who told us that the essence of the law is really in two parts: first of all we must love God with our whole heart and soul and mind and strength and, secondly, love our neighbor as ourselves.

Jesus' parable today focuses on the second great commandment to love one another as we love ourselves. It implies, of course, that we love ourselves. If you hate yourself, then don't love me like you love yourself.

Most Christians have pretty much absorbed the message of today's gospel. And probably most Christians will be surprised at the final judgment when Jesus tells us, "I was hungry and you gave me to eat, etc." Most of us do it simply because we know we've been blessed more than we deserve and helping someone less fortunate is what we know Christ would have us do. There are many in the world who do not even know Christ and who are non-believers, and they too are kind to others and to the less fortunate just because they know it's the right thing to do. They will really be surprised when Christ tells them, "I was hungry and you gave me to eat."

While we do good for others, the lesson in today's gospel, we can't forget the first commandment Jesus gave us: we must love God with our whole heart and soul and mind and strength. Loving God must include prayer and worship. If Jesus didn't mention the importance of prayer and worship in today's parable of the last judgment, it was because Jesus was talking to Jews who observed the Sabbath and went to synagogue every week. Jesus himself did so. It was part of their culture. Additionally a good Jew would pray two or three times a day as well as observe all the feast days. So Jesus did not need to remind them of their obligations to God, nor did St. Matthew when he wrote this passage for he was writing to Christians who at the time risked their lives to come together for the Eucharist on the Lord's day. Jesus, and Matthew who recorded Jesus' parable, were stressing to church-going people that just going to church is not enough to be a good Christian.

Christ our king is not an elected person whom we can vote out of office if we don't like what he tells us. When we honor him as our king, we commit ourselves to following him faithfully - the

only path that will lead to his kingdom. We have a celebration of thanksgiving this week, but our thanks should be offered more than once a year. It should be offered daily and especially weekly in the perfect offering of thanksgiving, the Eucharist. So let us continue honoring our king who shepherds us and blesses us and will some day expect us to account for how we have lived in his love and grace. Amen.

1st Sunday of Advent

November 30, 2008

INTRODUCTION: (Isaiah 63, 16b-17. 19b; 64, 2-7) Today's first reading is a desperate prayer for God to come to save his people. It is one of the most sublime prayers we find in Scripture. God's people were suffering; when it was too late they realized they had brought disaster upon themselves because of their pride and failure to listen to God's Word. They ask for his help and forgiveness. It's a good prayer for the beginning of Advent. We ask God to open our hearts to his coming.

HOMILY: (Mark 13, 33-37) As we've heard so many times, the word "advent" means "coming." The season of advent is a time to prepare for Christ's coming to us 2000 years ago and Christ's coming to us some day in the future. Jesus tells us emphatically to watch for his coming, to be alert.

In order to watch and to be alert, we have to stay focused, focused on Jesus as our savior and redeemer. Staying focused in this way implies taking time to reflect, to slow down. At the same time our culture is telling us to hurry up, to get our shopping done, our house decorated, our Christmas cards sent, a party here and there to go to. It can really raise a person's anxiety to hear these opposing messages: slow down, hurry up. We are constantly torn in both directions: slow down, hurry up.

There is an insert in today's bulletin giving a few suggestions as to how to think of time and how to manage it. There is an article in the inside page entitled: "A time for Everything" giving some time management ideas that I use most of the time. The only thing is the title is deceptive. You won't get everything done even with the best techniques, so don't plan on it or you'll always be frustrated. You have to put the most important things at the top of your list, so that at least you get those tasks done, while things that are of lesser importance you may never get to. We all have only 24 hours to work with and there is no trick to turning 24 hours into any more. Prioritize is the key idea. You might find the article helpful especially at this time of the year.

In today's gospel Jesus is telling us about prioritizing. He's going to return and we don't know when. We must be watchful - that means keeping ourselves ready for him to return - which means keeping our busy lives in perspective. One practical way to do that is to take time to meditate. There are myriad ways to meditate such as: 1) to have a conversation with God or

with Jesus, 2) to prayerfully read the Scriptures, 3) to look over the day and ask yourself what went well and what you are grateful for and what didn't and why, 4) to quiet our mind and say nothing, just giving God a chance to possibly say something to us or 5) to say the rosary. Whatever way you choose, it will help you stay more peaceful, reduce stress, lower your blood pressure and help you stay focused as to what's important in life and what is not so important.

I want to assure you I enjoy all the nice things about Christmas, all the lights and decorations, the celebrations, the gatherings with friends and family. After all, the birth of our king and savior is worthy of a grand celebration. But his birth is just the first step in the process of his coming. He comes with light and grace and love and peace to us now when we come to him in faith and prayer. And he will come again to take us to himself "so that where I am, you also may be." Since we don't know when he's going to come for us, we must be always ready for him to come knocking on our door to tell us he is ready for us. That's important.

With all the stuff that happens at this time of the year and the stuff we feel we must have ready for Christmas, we cannot forget that the child whose birth we celebrate was born in poverty, lived in poverty, died in poverty and taught us not to make "things" too important in our lives. I'm not a proponent of poverty, but sometimes we forget the meaning of Christmas is not in things but in our hearts.

As we prepare to celebrate Christ's coming in the past, in the present and in the future, we hear him tell us once again "be watchful, be alert."