

Feast of St. John Lateran November 9, 2014

INTRODUCTION

The Church of St. John Lateran is the oldest Roman Catholic Church. It is the Cathedral of Rome (thus it is the pope's cathedral). It is located outside the Vatican and it outranks all the other churches in the world. The Church of John Lateran was built on an estate that was originally owned by the Lateran family. The property had been confiscated by the emperor (probably Nero, who ended his life in 68 AD) and which a couple of hundred years later Constantine gave to the pope (sometime in the early 300's). Popes lived there for 1000 years before they moved to the Vatican. As the mother church of Christianity, it symbolically represents all Catholic churches that exist or have ever existed up to the present time.

Our first reading is a vision experienced by the prophet Ezekiel. He had lots of visions and recorded them. At the time this vision took place, Jerusalem and its Temple had been destroyed by the Babylonians. In his vision, Ezekiel sees that one day the city would be restored and the temple would be rebuilt. It is an idealized temple he sees. In his vision he sees a stream of water flowing from the temple, flowing east and south toward the desert of the Arabah and into the Dead Sea. The Dead Sea has its name from the fact that 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 turns the Dead Sea into fresh water. The meaning of the vision is that what flows from God's house: prayer and sacrifice and worship is life-giving. The book of Revelation tells us we will have to wait until the end of time to see the fulfillment of this vision in the heavenly kingdom.

HOMILY

Today's feast is very exciting for me and brings back some good memories. When Archbishop Schnurr became our Archbishop, there were a few dozen of us (priests and people from the Archdiocese) who went with him to Rome when he was to receive the pallium from the Holy Father. The pallium is a piece of cloth about 1½" wide that he wears over his vestments as a sign of his office as Archbishop and his unity with the Holy Father. While we were in Rome, we got to see a few significant sites and one of the places we went to was St. John Lateran Basilica. We toured the Basilica and what was most awesome for me were the statues of the 11 apostles plus St. Paul. They were nine feet tall and beautifully carved. They were created in the 18th century. You can find a small picture of them on the internet, not quite as impressive as the real thing. We had Mass there in a small chapel and the Archbishop asked me to preach for our group, which was a great honor. I had to laugh at myself when I finished my homily because after saying a few pertinent things about the building and the Church in general, I forgot to get to the main point of what I wanted to say. So, lest I forget my main point, I'm going to get to it right now.

When I gave my introduction, I deliberately mentioned that it was in the early 300's that Constantine gave the Lateran property to the pope. It was there that the first church in

the western hemisphere was built. And yet, after the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost (an event that took place almost 300 years earlier), the Church was already well established. For a variety of reasons, including persecutions, there were no church buildings for 300 years.

Whenever we hear the word “church” we almost automatically think of a building, a holy place where we seek to meet God. And that is true. But the primary meaning of the word “church” (in Greek the word is *ἐκκλησία*) means an assembly, a gathering, a congregation; in other words we people are the church. If we never came together for prayer and worship, or if we came together somewhere else and left this beautiful building sit empty, this building would no longer really be a church. It would just be a building that was meant to be a church or one that had been a church at one time, but the church would be where the people are gathered.

It’s nice to have a place where people can come together and be comfortable, but for three hundred years the Church didn’t have that. Sometimes it was downright uncomfortable when they had to gather in catacombs to avoid being arrested – but those who believed in Jesus did it because their gathering together in prayer and worship and their celebration of the Eucharist meant more than anything else to them. Jesus said as much when he said “he who loves father or mother, son or daughter, (or even his own life), more than me is not worthy of me.” *Mt. 10, 37; Lk 14,26* People who say they are part of a church or belong to a church but who never gather with their community are a contradiction. You can’t be part of a gathering or an assembly if you never gather.

That, I think, is the main thing today’s feast reminds us of. There are obvious exceptions of course, as for example a person is sick or shut in. Shut ins are still connected with the community by the Eucharist that the Communion Minister brings and often they can watch the Mass on TV. At any rate, I think you got the point. Amen.

33rd Ordinary – A Cycle November 16, 2014

INTRODUCTION: Our first reading from the Book of Proverbs was written in the wisdom tradition of the Old Testament. Other books in the wisdom tradition include the Book of Wisdom, Ecclesiastes (aka Qoheleth), Song of Songs, Sirach and Job. This collection of writings was meant to help people search for and find wisdom. Today’s passage describes the ideal wife, one who exemplifies all the elements of wisdom. The passage is meant to compliment the gospel which gives us a parable about three servants who received enormous gifts from their master; two of the three used their gift wisely, the third did not.

HOMILY: The gospel of Matthew contains five major speeches of Jesus. The first of those speeches is the Sermon on the Mount. There are four other lengthy teachings of Jesus. Today’s gospel is from the last major speech and it is called the Eschatological

Discourse. Eschatological means Jesus is talking to us about the last things: the end of the world, the coming of the Son of Man on the last day, the last judgment, and the arrival of God's kingdom in its fullness.

That is the context for today's gospel. The return of the master (the Lord) represents the last judgment when the Lord will ask each of us "what did you do with the gifts I have given you?" The gifts that had been given to the servants were talents, which was a certain weight of gold or silver. Commentators cannot give a clear idea of what a talent was worth. I've seen it valued as anything from \$1000 to a million dollars. Whatever, for simple people who were usually paid each day just enough to survive the next day, a talent was a lot of money. It might be interesting to mention it was through familiarity with this word talent in today's gospel that in the Middle Ages the word talent came to mean a special gift of being able to do something well.

Note, the master does not tell his servants what to do with the money. He obviously expects them to follow the example he had always shown them, to use the time they had as they waited for his return, to increase what they had been given. I probably would not have been too hard on the third servant who buried his money. Burying the money was a prudent thing, so it would not be found or stolen. The master, however, in his wisdom saw it as laziness.

There is one thing about the money that is important but which we don't notice until the end of the parable. The master was giving the money to his servants, not in order to get it back, but as a personal gift to each of them. Apparently, they didn't know that until the master said "take the talent from him (the one who buried it) and give it to the one with the ten talents." God doesn't want back the gifts he gives us; he wants us to use them to help others and to increase them in ourselves. He doesn't want us to bury them in the ground until we see our end is near and then we can dig them up so as to return them to the Lord.

We've been told many times that using the gifts we've been given, whatever they might be, will help us be successful in this life. Jesus wants us to be successful spiritually by using the spiritual gifts we've been given, the Scriptures, the Sacraments, the time we can use for prayer, being good to others, and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. If we do nothing with the graces and opportunities God has given us, it will not be a good thing. There will be more next week about the Last Judgment - how those who put their gifts and talents to good use were happy they did, while those who held on to them just for themselves ended up deeply regretting it. Amen.

Christ the King – A Cycle

November 23, 2014

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 at the time of the Babylonian invasion. God said he himself would lead them rightly. We see this prophecy perfectly fulfilled in Jesus. In our second reading, the whole 15th chapter from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, from which our reading is taken, is on the topic of the resurrection. Paul tells us the risen Jesus will reign until evil in every form has been destroyed. Then Jesus 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: In Matthew's gospel, Jesus' first major sermon is the Sermon on the Mount. The sermon begins with the beatitudes, one of which is: "blessed are the merciful, for they will obtain mercy." Today's gospel is the last of Jesus' major sermons in Matthew, and it dramatically portrays what Jesus means by "blessed are the merciful."

Today's gospel is one of the best known of Jesus' parables. It tells us, first of all, that at the end of time there will be only two kingdoms: the kingdom of God where there will be happiness beyond anything we can imagine and there will be the kingdom of Satan where there will be endless remorse and suffering. Notice that we're the ones who make the decision as to which kingdom we will belong – we make that choice not by what we say but by the way we live. Karma is a reality.

The parable tells us about who Jesus is. He is the Son of Man, a mysterious heavenly being to whom God grants dominion, glory and kingship (Daniel 7,14). Jesus has God for his Father (Mt. 25,34) He is called "king," which indicates Messiah and Son of David in Matthew and is also called "Lord" (Mt. 25, 37). He is both judge and shepherd. Jesus' identity was hidden, except in the things that he did (forgiving sins, interpreting the Law, healing the sick, raising the dead and various other miracles), but here Jesus appears in all his glory.

The usual interpretation of today's gospel is that "all the nations" need to respond to the needs of people experiencing some form of distress, "these least brothers of mine." A person might ask, "What about going to Church on Sunday?" What about the other commandments? Aren't those things important? Of course they are. Jesus did say the first and greatest commandment is to love God with our whole heart and soul and mind and strength. Loving God involves more than giving a sandwich to a hungry person or giving a cup of water to a thirsty person. It does include that, but it also includes prayer

and worship and keeping the commandments. "If you love me you will keep my commandments," Jesus told his disciples at the Last Supper.

One commentator, Fr. Daniel Harrington, had a different interpretation for today's gospel. His interpretation asks what do these two phrases mean: "all the nations," and "these least brothers of mine." He points out when Matthew speaks of all the nations in other places in his gospel, he is speaking of the Gentiles - those who are not Jewish or are not identified as the people of God. When he speaks of the least of his brothers he is talking about Christian missionaries or ordinary Christians. If these translations are correct, the passage is about Jesus judging Gentiles and how they treated Christian missionaries or ordinary Christians. Is this an important question for us? It certainly is a question frequently asked these days: "Can non-Christians get into heaven?" According to Fr. Harrington, this is one of the very few texts in Scripture that deals with the salvation of non-Christians and how they can be saved. They are saved by the way they treat Christian missionaries or ordinary Christians. Why is that so? Because such acts of kindness are done for Christ himself. "Whoever receives you, receives me and whoever receives me, receives him who sent me," Jesus said to his disciples when he sent them out to preach. Well then, does the parable teach us anything about what is expected of us - we who are Christians. We have lots of instructions, the Scriptures, the Sacraments, the Catechism, the lives of saints who are great examples of love of others. If Gentiles are expected to show kindness for God's people, how much more are we expected to show kindness to others.

One last thought about this gospel. It gave me some insight into why heaven will be such a happy place. Consider the kind of people God invites into his kingdom - people who care about others, not people whose care is only about themselves. If you were surrounded only by people who were caring and loving people, wouldn't life be much more pleasant? Amen.

1st Sunday of Advent - B Cycle November 30, 2014

INTRODUCTION: (*Isaiah 63, 16b-17. 19b; 64, 2-7*) A true prophet has an ability to see and know God more profoundly than anyone else can. In our first reading taken from Isaiah, the prophet recognized that when the Babylonians invaded and destroyed Israel, it was a disaster that the leaders of God's people brought upon themselves for having ignored the guidance God had tried to give them. After 50 years of captivity, the Persians, who conquered the Babylonians, allowed the Jews to return to their homeland, Israel. The job of rebuilding what had been destroyed 50 years earlier was enormous. With this background, we hear the prophet lament how God's people are now suffering and, in the name of God's wayward people, the prophet prays for their heavenly Father to forgive them and help them. Just notice some of these beautiful expressions in the prayer: "Oh that you would rend the heavens (tear them open) and come down. Would that you might meet us doing right...Behold, you are angry, and we

are sinful...our guilt carries us away...Yet, you are our father, we are the work of your hands.”

HOMILY: (*Mark 13, 33-37*) A new Church Year begins today. There are no parties, no Champaign being uncorked, no funny hats or noise makers or staying up until midnight. As a matter of fact, it is quite the opposite. So we can be more open to Christ's coming, there are no flowers, the Gloria is not said or sung, the vestments are violet - a symbolic color for penance. Without any fanfare there is a change of gospels. We have been hearing from Matthew and suddenly today we heard from the gospel of Mark. The gospel of Matthew is laid aside until we take it up again two years from now.

It might be useful to say a couple of things about St. Mark since we will be hearing from his gospel for most of this coming year. Mark is the shortest of the three gospels and also the oldest. It was written most probably in Rome sometime between the years 64-67. Tradition describes Mark as the interpreter of Peter. That is, he wrote down whatever he remembered of Peter's proclamation of the good news about Jesus Christ. That's what the word gospel means: "good news." Mark was writing simply for the Christian community at Rome. About 10 or 20 years after Mark, Matthew and Luke wrote their gospels - also written for their own Christian communities. Matthew and Luke borrowed heavily from Mark in writing their gospels as well as including additional materials they had available to them.

Today's gospel is unusually short, but its message is profound. Three times Jesus tells his followers (including us) to be watchful, to be awake, to be alert. He doesn't mean we need to stay up all night watching TV or something. He wants us to be awake, waiting for his coming.

His coming is threefold. First, he came in the past. The Son of God came to us and took on our human nature. We did nothing to earn this or to make this happen. It was God's own choice because of his great love and because of our great need for the blessings he could bring that he came to us. We profess this each week: "for us and for our salvation he came down from heaven and by the Holy Spirit he was incarnate of the Virgin Mary and became man." We celebrate this coming in a few weeks, but we must stay aware of what an awesome thing this is. As we focus on Christmas trees and gifts and cards and parties, we must also continue to be aware of God's infinite love, a love so great that he was moved to become human to teach us and forgive us and even suffer for us to bring us eternal life.

The second way he comes to us is in the present. He comes in his word, in the sacraments, in prayer and in the poor. We must be aware of these ways so we can recognize him and respond to him, listening to his word, letting ourselves be nourished by the sacraments, taking time to pray, helping those who come our way who have real needs.

The third way he comes to us is in the future. We do not know when that moment will arrive or in what manner it will arrive, but it will arrive for all of us. It could come as

some great tragedy such as the attack on the Twin Towers on 9/11, or we could all leave this world (with or without warning) when our own personal time comes to leave. But we know for sure, 100 years from now, this world will be populated by a whole different group of people, and probably another billion more than we have right now. We will have moved on. We have to be ready and since we know not the day nor the hour, in order to be ready any time, we have to be ready all the time. Jesus' little parable in today's gospel tells us about a man traveling abroad and the uncertainty about the time of his return. That man is the Son of Man, Jesus, who told his apostles at the last supper: "I am going to go and get a place ready for you, then I will come back to take you with me so that where I am you also may be." When he comes knocking on our door may we be ready, may we greet him as a friend and not as a stranger. May we be watching and alert for his coming. Amen.