

Ordinary 21C - 2019 - In Touch With Our Faith

During the past few weeks, Luke has been telling us about Jesus' teachings on the "**parousia**", or his second coming, and what we need to do to prepare for it. Three weeks ago, we heard the **parable of the greedy rich man** who refused to share God's blessings to him with others in need. Then two weeks ago, our Lord told us that we need to let go of all that we hold so dear here on earth - whether it be possessions or power or wealth or anything else, for that matter - and **build up a treasure in heaven**. Last week, Jesus told us that he had to endure a **baptism of suffering** in order to attain his glory. And now today, our Lord tells us that "People will come from the east and the west, from the north and the south, and will take their place at the feast in the kingdom of God. Some who are last will be first and some who are first will be last."

In the first reading, **Isaiah** tells the Israelites much the same thing when he says that God will "come to gather nations of every language; they shall come and see his glory". This was a radical message at the time. The Hebrews firmly believed that they would be saved - and others wouldn't - just because they were God's chosen people. The message of all of these passages is clear: Christ came to turn everything that people believed at that time upside down. For example, the Israelites believed that wealth was a sign of God's blessing, whereas poverty was a sign of his displeasure. But Christ taught that riches and power or anything else that is in this world will not guarantee us eternal life. Some of those in high places, places of honor, may not be saved, whereas the beggar Lazarus is saved. Nothing is what it seems to be.

The author C. S. Lewis puts it this way:

- "Give up your self, and you will find your real self. Lose your life and you will save it. Submit to death, death of your ambitions and favorite wishes every day and death of your whole body in the end: submit with every fiber of your being, and you will find eternal life. Keep back nothing. Nothing that you have not given away will ever really be yours. Nothing in you that has not died will ever be raised from the dead. Look for yourself, and you will find in the long run only hatred, loneliness, despair, rage, ruin, and decay. But look for Christ and you will find Him, and with Him everything else thrown in." (1)

Nothing is what it seems to be. Wealth and riches do not mean security. Power on earth does not ensure eternal life in heaven. That is why staying in touch with our faith is so important. As we heard in last week's readings, the life of a Christian is not an easy one. Our human nature constantly yearns for security, for ease of living, for creature comforts. The message of the gospels is exactly the opposite. We need to be in touch with our faith on a frequent basis or we will fall back into our "natural" habits of acting.

In essence, Christ calls us out of a self-centered life to a life focused on others. Consider the following story.

- There was a woman who had been used to every luxury and comfort. When she died and arrived in heaven, an angel was sent to conduct her to her house there. They passed many a lovely mansion and the woman thought that each one, as they came to it, must be the one allotted to her. When they had passed through the main streets, they came to the outskirts where the houses were much smaller; and on the very fringe they came to a house which was little more than a shack. "That is your house," said the conducting angel. "What!" said the woman. "That! I cannot live in that." "I am sorry," said the angel, "but that is all we could build for you with the materials you sent up." (2)

Here is a woman who had lived a comfortable life but hadn't helped others in need. She was like the rich man that we heard about in the gospel three weeks ago. In essence, she was long on wealth but short on works. And these works are the "materials" that are used to build our dwelling place in heaven.

I mentioned earlier that we need to stay in touch with our faith. We need to read the gospels and come to church as often as we can in order to keep our faith alive. But we can't be satisfied with merely being present to hear God's word. We have to leave this church and go out and put that Word into practice in our daily lives. Earlier in this chapter of Luke's gospel, the chief of the synogogue became angry with Jesus because he healed a woman on the sabbath. Christ lashed out at him and the other leaders of the Jews because they were too concerned with the mere observance of rules and not with a change of heart. It is the same for us. Being regular church-goers isn't enough. It is only a start. We have to be careful that we don't mistake the means for the end, as the leaders of the Jews did.

What it comes down to is what Lewis mentioned in the quote earlier: "Nothing that you have not given away will ever really be yours". We have to replace our selfishness with other-centeredness. And what we give away, what we plant in the hearts of others, are our works of charity. We have to see Jesus in others and act accordingly.

Unjust rules and regulations, therefore, are not the road to heaven.

- Greyhound bus lines had a rule: No pets on their buses. And so late one night at a rural truck stop in Florida, a Greyhound driver kicked an 80-year-old woman off his bus. Her crime? She was returning home from her birthday party with her present; a tiny puppy named Cookie. Dogs aren't allowed on Greyhound buses and the driver refused to make an exception, leaving this poor elderly woman about eighty miles from home at three in the morning. The bus driver said, "We have a rule. We have a rule."
- A security guard summoned by the bus driver called sheriff's deputies to escort her away--adding to this poor woman's fright. "When the bus pulled away and I saw all those policemen I was scared," she said. "I thought they were going to put me in jail. I don't know, I was crazy with fear. I've never gone to jail."
- What could have quickly become a terrifying ordeal for the woman, who walks with a crutch and has trouble hearing and seeing, instead became an inspiration. After getting her a sandwich and something to drink, police from five different jurisdictions teamed up to ferry her home. "I've never seen so many people so nice with me--an old lady," she said. "They gave me love, respect, attention. Love has a lot of names," she continued, "compassion, respect, friendliness." Greyhound apologized and gave her a refund. The undignified driver, a 20-year Greyhound veteran, was suspended. (3)

I think it can be well summed up in one final short story:

- Late one night, the Teacher sat around a blazing fire with a small number of disciples. Their conversation was broken by periods of silence when they gazed at the stars or stared into the glowing embers. Suddenly the Teacher posed a question: "How can we know when the night has ended and the day has begun?"
- Eagerly a young man answered, "You know the night is over when you can look off in the distance and tell which animal is a dog and which is a sheep. Is that the right answer, Teacher?"
- "It is a good answer," the Teacher said slowly, "but it isn't quite the answer I would give."
- A second disciple ventured a guess. "You know the night is over when the light falls on the leaves and you can tell whether it is an olive tree or a fig tree," she said.
- Once again the Teacher shook his head. "That was a fine answer; still, it is not the answer I seek," he said gently.
- Immediately the disciples began to argue with one another. Finally, one of them begged the Teacher, "Answer your own question, Teacher, for we cannot think of another response." The Teacher looked intently at the eager faces before he spoke. "When you look into the eyes of another human being and see a brother or a sister, you will know it is morning. If you cannot see a brother or a sister, you will know that no matter what time it is, for you it will always be night. And you will always be in the dark." (4)

Attendance at Mass or liturgies or services is a commendable thing. Our faith cannot live without the regular nourishment of the Word and the Eucharist. But we have to always ask ourselves one further question: are we also attending to the needs of others? If we don't care for the images of Christ that we encounter in others everyday of our lives, then we may just find that Christ will not be able to care for us in the next life....

References

1. From *Mere Christianity*, by C. S. Lewis, p. 190. The MacMillan Company, New York, NY.
 2. **On Heaven**. Reprinted with permission from *Sower's Seeds*, p. 60, copyright 1990 by Brian Cavanaugh, T.O.R. Paulist Press, Mahwah, NJ. [
 3. The Associated Press 11/23, as quoted in *Dynamic Preaching* pp. 38-39
 4. **Night and Day**. Reprinted with permission from *A Fresh Packet of Sower's Seeds, Third Planting*, pp. 61-62. Copyright 1994 by Brian Cavanaugh, T.O.R. Paulist Press, Mahwah, NJ. (This resource, as well as a package of all five of Brian's *Sower's Seeds* books, is available at a discount through the [Homiletic Resource Center](#).)
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