

The Church of Saint Pascal Baylon

Fr. Mike Byron, Pastor: Sunday Homily

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When I was a young altar server we had a fairly elderly priest in residence at my parish. Fr. Clement DeMuth, S. J. came across as crotchety, short-tempered and hyper-critical about many things. Most altar servers feared him. If you weren't standing in just the right place, or if you poured too much water on his hands, or not enough, he'd let you know about it, sometimes right there in front of everybody. I didn't know anything about his life or ministry other than what I saw in church. His status was described in the bulletin as being "in residence," but that didn't clarify much.

Eventually I came to know that he had spent a great deal of his life at Sogang University in Seoul, South Korea. I don't know what he did there, but I discovered that he was spending his retirement years here working to connect Korean orphans with families in the United States who wanted to adopt them. And it turns out that one of the families was mine.

One of the most enduring memories I have from my high school years was heading out to the airport in the middle of an October night to greet a whole plane full of Korean orphans whom Fr. DeMuth had arranged to come to Minnesota for a better life. My new sister was 2 ½ years old then, which made her among the oldest children on the flight.

He was there to greet them all too, and I first saw a side of Fr. DeMuth that I'd never seen before, and in fact could scarcely imagine: The man loved children. Who knew? And he was capable of immense tenderness toward them. It was very soon after that that he appeared at our family home because he knew that my sister spoke no English and probably was bewildered and scared by all that was happening to her world. But he spoke Korean, so he took her in his lap and explained to her all that he could about what was going on. And he translated for the rest of our family so that we could begin to understand her too. I still keep a photograph of that wonderful encounter.

My regard for DeMuth changed enormously and permanently because of what I saw that month. His liturgical fussiness just stopped being very important to me because he had shown me, and many others, images of Christian compassion, and love, and priestly humility. Things that matter a lot more. He has been dead now for about 25 years, so I guess it's now up to me. It's up to all of us.

After all, why should anybody be impressed with claims about true religion in the absence of any evidence of it? And who would put any trust in that? And why should they? In today's gospel of Matthew, we hear yet again from the great prophet John the Baptist who wants to know whether Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah, or whether John the Baptist should keep looking. Jesus could have responded to a simple yes or no, but that would have been a simple reply of "believe it because I say so." who is going to be moved by *that*, either then or today? Thankfully in our 21st Century Roman Catholic Church was are finally emerging from a long historical effort to do exactly that, and the effort went badly.

"Do it because I say so" is not a gospel. That's not good news. That's just command and control, and we Catholics have sometimes become a little too expert at that over the centuries.

So St. Matthew reminds us about what Jesus considered to be a truly convincing proclamation of the gospel of his heavenly Father:

The blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the good news proclaimed to them.

In other words, a real gospel isn't just talk; it's transforming, and it's inviting, and it's capable of being experienced and witnessed by actual human beings here and now, and a source of joy.

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Sometimes Jesus did all of those things in very *physical* ways, giving sight, hearing, walking, healing and resuscitation. But he didn't do that for everybody. Why not? Some of them never asked. Some of them doubted and despaired. Some of them had never heard of him or were never curious about his message, curious enough to show up. But I think at the heart of the gospel today is the invitation to us not to be purely physical in the way we hear it. In other words, there are *many* ways to be blind, deaf, diseased, lame, dead and poor, and many of those have little to do with our bodies. And because this gospel has to do with the promises of eternity, we can impoverish it when we try to reduce it to things that have merely to do with our anatomy or social condition.

We've all known profoundly poor people who happen to have a lot of money. We've all known deaf people who can hear out of their ears just fine. We've all known diseased people who are in fine physical form. We've all known dead and lame people who are still drawing breath and going to the gym regularly. And we've all known financially poor people who enjoy greater riches than we have ever known. Jesus' message was and is for them too. This is a gospel that offers hope and joy to *everyone*, but it has to be credible, it has to be visible, it has to be persuasive and not merely a theory. Our Advent gospel today finds Jesus praising the greatness of John the Baptist. And it was John the Baptist who last weekend told us to offer some concrete evidence of what we believe, and do it in ways that people looking on can actually notice and be moved, and impressed, and encouraged by. Fr. DeMuth gave my family our sister. Now that's impressive and moving! Even more than being at Mass with him. (Please keep coming to Mass, too, but I hope you see the point.)