

Homily For Tuesday of the 19th Week of Ordinary Time- Year 1

St Peter's 8:30 AM Mass - August 13, 2019

Dt. 31:1-8 "Have no fear for it is the Lord your God who goes with you. He will not fail or forsake you."

Canticle, Dt 32:3-12 "The Lord alone guided his people, Jacob. No foreign god was with him."

Matt. 18:1-5,10-14 "Do not despise one of these little ones for their angels see the face of my Father."

The Prodigal Sheep

Introduction

In a course at the university, I met some students from the business faculty there. Curious about what kinds of jobs they looked forward to with their business degrees, I asked where they thought they would be in five years. Every single one, in that small sample of students, felt they would be managers in some company or other within five years. I don't know who they thought was going to be doing the actual day to day company business, but they would be the ones managing those people and that work.

Many many times, Jesus singled out Peter as primary among the disciples. Like Moses preparing Joshua to lead the people into the land of the promise, so it looked like there was an order, a kind of hierarchy, amongst Jesus' disciples. Because they were the closest to Jesus during his public ministry, it sure looked like they would be set aside for some great roles, high positions in the kingdom.

Jesus talked about the kingdom of heaven a lot, and people were thinking about it a lot, especially since it looked more and more remote that Israel would have its own kingdom back in their control. So, it was, in a way, natural for them to look towards the new kingdom and to ask, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"

Keys to the Kingdom

In brief, here are points Jesus makes to them, in today's Gospel passage, about where everyone will be in that kingdom.

First, and very shockingly I think, if you aren't humble like a child you won't even be in heaven.

Secondly, no one gets to choose their place in heaven, but if you do truly take on a simple childlike humility before God, not desiring to be exalted, you will already be the greatest in heaven. I have sometimes wondered how those students would handle it if they didn't get to be those managers. Would they have the humility and willingness to just be really good employees, wherever they ended up?

The third thing that comes up about the kingdom is that those who are humble, childlike disciples, have guardian angels who are right in God's very presence. The Old Testament doesn't use that term but frequently it encourages faithful individuals to trust that God's angels will guard and assist them. To go against any of Jesus' disciples who have the heavenly qualities will pit you against the power of their guardian angels.

Finally, Jesus further answers the question of greatness in the kingdom with an illustration. Those childlike disciples are so precious to God that, like the shepherd who loves the sheep and will give his life for them, he will not stop pursuing those disciples who have wandered away, until he brings them back into the kingdom. Unlike the rest of the sheep, who just wait for the shepherd to return, disciples of the kingdom will also care for those who have gone astray.

We can see through this illustration that God is like the father of the prodigal son, who turns away from his father and goes his own way, but the father never stops looking for him. And, when he returns, is full of joy.

Moses

Moses was the shepherd of God's people through forty years in the desert, making sure they were cared for and that they became disciples of the most high God, ready to take their place in that promised kingdom. Before his death, Moses told the people exactly what God wanted them to know. Be faithful and God will lead you. Trust in yourself and you will fail. Then he gave his authority to Joshua and repeated to him the exact same message.

Jesus told the disciples, the new people of God, that there was a particular path to participation in God's heavenly kingdom. Then he gave his authority to Peter, to care for the disciples on that journey. Jesus is the new Moses, who holds nothing back to pursue us, until we return from wherever we have gone astray. Now his disciples must do the same for others.

The Little Disciple

St. Therese of Lisieux felt overwhelmed by the holiness of the great and famous saints of the Church. She considered herself too small and weak to aspire to their heroic holiness. But, she had great confidence that God was seeking her out for the same kingdom as those great saints. She is called a Doctor of the Church, along with the greatest of those saints, because she pursued a way of spiritual childhood. She approached Jesus in total trust and absolute surrender, like a small child who is completely dependent on its parents. She learned to love her spiritual poverty and her dependence on God.

Like St. Therese, those who approach Jesus in spiritual childhood will be among the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, for they allow Jesus to lift them spiritually far beyond what they could do on their own. It's not an easy task for us to be humble disciples. Our culture does not encourage it. But consider the reward. Could anything be more precious or desirable than that?