

Homily For Monday of the 21st Week of Ordinary Time- Year II

St Peter's 8:30am Mass- August 27, 2018

2 Thess 1:1-5,11-12 "We always pray ... that God will make you worthy of his call."

Psalm 96: "Proclaim God's marvelous deeds to all the nations."

Matthew 23:13-22 "Woe to you blind guides who say ..."

Intro

St. Paul went out of his way to encourage and praise the people of the Thessalonian church, even though things were certainly not perfect there. But Jesus seems to go out of his way to insult and criticize a certain group of people- the scribes and Pharisees, whom he calls hypocrites, blind guides and, finally, children of hell. This is not the sweet, gentle Jesus that many people, both inside the Church and out, would like to make him. "What a friend we have in Jesus" goes one old hymn for children. But what makes Jesus so angry and why should it matter to us?

Theme

These are the first two of what are called the 7 woes, or warnings about judgement to befall those who lead people astray. It's the strongest language Jesus uses to this point in Matthew's Gospel. We know that a hypocrite is someone whose actions are not consistent with his words. The most damning thing for them is, they know better, or they SHOULD know better. There is no excuse.

Application

In the first half of this Gospel passage is the 'woe' or judgement. The Pharisaic interpretation and teaching of the law inoculates people against the true law and therefore "locks" people out of the kingdom. In the second half, Jesus uses two parallel (they illustrate the same problem) examples of what they do.

It reminds me of the second of the ten commandments, one which frequently gets glossed over. The first commandment is to not have any other gods before God, and the third commandment is to honour the Sabbath. The Second commandment: Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain. Usually, we call this 'swearing'.

Swearing: For us, it is using a bad word, or expressing God's name in anger, but in Hebrew culture it is making, what would be to us, a commitment, like a contract but, instead of a written agreement using a lawyer and the signature of a witness, they would swear by the witness of an object.

In vain: Means that it serves no purpose. We make God's name useless, because we are not using it as a sign of worship, or petition, or praise, or sorrow. We take what is holy and apply it to something which is ordinary. The fancy word for it is 'profane'. So, we call it 'profanity'. There are sacred things and there are profane things.

The uselessness of their oaths is because they are swearing by what is most valuable in the material world: gold and a sacrifice on an altar. It is a kind of idolatry, like when the people worshipped the golden calf. Jesus condemns their focus on the things of value to humans and demands that they refocus on what is holy. We can relate to these things: the sanctuary, the place of God's presence, and the altar, the place of the sacrifice of our Lord, Jesus Christ, who held back nothing from us to UNLOCK salvation.

Call To Action

Anyone who presumes to teach or present the Christian faith must realize that we must teach Christ, and not our own version of the Gospel. In a diocese, the bishop is the one who is responsible for all teaching. Those of us who teach, do so only under the Bishop's authority. I am not free to teach something different about our faith than what they do. I feel fortunate that I have had two bishops under whom I feel privileged to teach. But all of us are called to be teachers of the Good News of Jesus Christ.

St. Monica was a teacher in this way. She kept her focus on Christ. She did not let the trials of her life deter her from the task at hand, to convert those closest to her to Christ. It didn't matter how long that took or how many trials in the process. We love St. Monica because she 'unlocked' the kingdom of heaven for her family members, with great patience and perseverance. And when she accomplished that for which she believed God had set her the task, there was nothing left to do, and she was ready to go.

I visited a dying friend who said as much. He said that he now understood that his service on earth is over and that he is at peace (like Monica). This is always our calling: to recognize what is sacred and to live lives consistent with what is holy, in our words and in our deeds.