

Homily For Tuesday of the 8th Week of Ordinary Time- Year 1

St Peter's 8:30am Mass - March 5, 2019

Sirach 35: 1-12 "Give to the Most High as he has given to you, and as generously as you can afford."

Psalm 50 "Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving and pay your vows to the most high."

Mark 10: 28-31 "You will receive a hundredfold now in this age, and in the age to come eternal life."

Who Me? Sacrifice?

Introduction

Here we have Jesus at his confusing best. Sometimes I have a great deal of sympathy for the disciples as they try to figure out what their master wants them to understand. Today's Gospel passage follows immediately after yesterday's, which ended with the disciples being 'greatly astounded' at the idea that a rich man could not enter heaven.

But the theme running through today's readings is sacrifice. That's already a confusing topic for us without a Jewish worldview. What makes a proper sacrifice? Does God need or want sacrifice? Can there be good and bad reasons for making sacrifices? What should be the attitude of someone making a sacrifice?

On the day before the beginning of Lent, 2019, these questions should really matter to us. After all, we have our own Catholic version of sacrifice. We ask: "so what are you going to give up for Lent?" Interestingly, the children often find this an exciting idea. But we want to do it right.

Sacrifice in Sirach

Important to note is that sacrifice is an offering. It is a gift to God. In the ancient world, sacrifices of animals or grains or even of children were offered to gods who demanded them in return for protection or fertility or even just to demonstrate power over the people.

But, even though the Jewish law required sacrifice, there were profound new meanings attached to those sacrifices. In these few verses of Sirach, we get an idea of some of the ways this God is different from the gods of the nations and, therefore, how different the meaning of the sacrifices.

First, God does not need our offerings, our sacrifices. This God is entirely self sufficient and benefits absolutely nothing by anything we can offer him.

Naturally, then, we would ask if there is any benefit to such an offering. Why bother? But Sirach says "do not appear before the Lord empty handed." Here are a few reasons in the text:

1. Give to God as he has given to us. Recognize that we are the ones who have been blessed with life and a purpose in this world and a destiny beyond this world. Our offering is an outward sign, or recognition, that all we have and all we are comes from God's goodness and His desire to bless us.
2. Further to this idea, In the beginning, God created everything from nothing. At creation, we find that the first commandment was to be good stewards - caretakers - of all that he had made. When we sacrifice to God, we are acknowledging that everything belongs to God. This is hard because we have such strong ideas of ownership and possession, but none of it is ours. We are stewards, not owners.
3. To give cheerfully, not grudgingly, is the only way we can have grateful hearts. Perhaps you have heard of the idea of gratitude journaling. It is being promoted as a way of developing a sense of well being. No one can be happy without being grateful. It's a fact of human nature, the nature with which God has made us.
4. Keep from wickedness by giving freely. Offering what we have pleases God, but really, sacrifice with the right attitude cancels greed and pride and promotes righteousness, which is holiness.
5. Sacrifice to God symbolizes our desire to atone for our sins, which separate us from the God who wants only blessing for us. In the end, that atonement lifts us up and brings us closer to God.

Mark

In Jesus' time, there were also some broken ideas about sacrificial offering. There must have been some doubts among those disciples. As Peter declares: we have given up, or sacrificed, not just the 10% tithe required by the law, but we have given up everything to follow you. You asked us to follow you and we didn't hold back. Essentially, he is asking: what is going to be our compensation, our reward?

And Jesus gives yet another surprising answer. Oh, yes, you will get one hundred times what you gave up. But you will also be persecuted. Now that's not what they wanted to hear. When Mark is writing his Gospel for the Church at Rome, there is a severe persecution going on under Emperor Nero. The Christians there are starting to ask that question: Is this what we have to look forward to? And, in Mark, Jesus makes it a point to say, yes, for now. But you will also have life beyond measure - eternal life.

But don't try to possess that life. It's a free gift. Even your position in the kingdom is not something for you to 'possess'. Not only do you not know who will be first or last but you should stop even thinking in that way, even as a disciple-it's not a kingdom way of thinking.

Call To Action

And so, we might ask, what is our reward if we sacrifice to our God. What if, this Lent, we make some sacrifices. Will there be any point to it? Will something good happen?

The benefit of our sacrifice will not be a 'payment for services rendered' to God. Our sacrifice to God changes us. It forms who we are. This is the Lenten process: be shaped into what God wants you to be, so that you may be blessed.

During this mass, we will make an offering of bread and wine, which symbolize the giving of ourselves to God, who turns that tiny gift into the 'astounding' gift of God himself, which he gives back to us at Communion. It is His promise of eternal life to those who make a pleasing sacrifice to God.