

Homily For Friday of the First Week of Lent - Year 1

St Peter's 8:30am Mass - Mar 3, 2023

Ezekiel 18:21-28 "When the wicked turn to God"

Psalms 130:1-6 "With you, O Lord, there is forgiveness"

Matthew 5:20-26 "Be reconciled, then offer your gift at the altar."

A Different Kind of Accounting

Introduction

We know that when we are doing our personal accounting, the 'bottom line' is the most important number. Is there enough money for the expenses we have? Are we in the red or in the black? Maybe it's more about future security, or maybe it's the extras: whether we can afford a certain vacation or a new car. Our churches also have been working hard during difficult times to keep that bottom line positive for the sake of our important ministries.

I knew a therapist many years ago who would ask his clients about their relationship bottom line. What are you willing to give to your marriage or family or friends, or perhaps what are you willing to put up with in those relationships? He would say you have to sit down and really engage each other in dialogue. Because it was a sitting thing, he described the bottom line literally, like this: UU (sitting)

Today's passages tell us how God does his accounting. It's so different than ours. Only during an intense period of prayer, like we do in Lent, can we really understand the keys to the way God accounts with us.

Ezekiel

God tells Ezekiel to give the people of Israel a course on divine accounting. In a nutshell, if a really bad person turns to God, he shall live. He shall be saved. But, if a good man turns away from doing good, and does evil things, he shall die. That doesn't mean physical death. It's the loss of relationship with God. In new

testament terms, it is being thrown out of the kingdom into the dark where there is wailing and gnashing of teeth, to quote Jesus.

When it comes to the story of our life, the ending is what matters. It is entirely about whether our hearts have been turned to God. It does not matter how many items are on the positive side of the accounting ledger. If the money coming in is way more than the expenses, we say that we are in the black, secure. But the accounting of the kingdom doesn't work like that. If we pile up all our good deeds and say to God, look how many more good things I did than bad, it is useless. God says to Ezekiel that the only thing that matters is whether a person turned to God or turned away from God. There is only one thing in the accounts that matters. It outweighs everything else. We have the expression: Every saint has a past, and every sinner has a future. Our future is in Christ. Our past is thrown out, no longer remembered. Two kinds of accounting. Two kinds of judgment. The kingdom currency is mercy, not money.

Matthew

Jesus says that, while you are offering a gift at the altar and you remember something your brother or sister has against you, immediately get up, leave your gift there at the altar and go be reconciled first, then come and offer your gift. In Israel, one would go to Jerusalem at least once a year, and as many as three times, to offer a sacrifice to God: in thanksgiving or in atonement for sins. It was a great act of devotion and commitment.

But that is not just an ancient practice. We do this at every mass. It gets missed, especially at a weekday mass when the gifts of bread and wine are already here at the altar. But this is a sacred moment that we should not miss. We bring to the altar our gifts. In fact, along with the bread and wine, we are bringing our whole selves to offer to God, who offers it back to us, transformed into the gift of himself.

Jesus goes on to say that if, while offering your gift, you remember some unresolved hostility with someone in your life, you must go and make peace with them before returning to the altar. This 'remembering' is not a simple recalling of

an incident or event. It is an awareness of something we already know about, but now it rises to the surface of our attention. We become aware that this tension with someone in our lives is a barrier between us and God at the very moment of offering our gift at the altar. This problem would make our gift useless, in vain. To take this question seriously is to confront our broken human nature at the deepest level.

Jesus explains how far you have to go to deal with this issue. This passage is from the sermon on the mount. He was talking with the people of Galilee, in the northern hill country. But these people offer their gift at the temple in Jerusalem, many days difficult travel away. To take Jesus at his word, if they have this kind of remembrance, they would have to leave the altar at the temple, travel all the way back north, reconcile with brother or sister, before going back to complete their act of worship. It is no small thing Jesus asks of them, nor of us. In fact, a place in the Kingdom of heaven is at stake. The bottom line is not about a luxury. It is, without exaggerating, life or death.

Call To Conversion

As is often the case in these lenten days, we could simply pray the psalm and be made ready for the Easter celebration of the resurrection. "Lord, If you mark iniquity, who can stand? But with you, O Lord, there is forgiveness." Is there a better prayer? Is there a better recognition of where our hope for the end of our story. Is there a better motivation for making things right in our lives and turning again to the God of mercy? Is there a better way of accounting the only bottom line that matters? Let us offer hearts willing to reconcile. Let us make ourselves ready to receive his mercy, the only good that matters.

Key Passages

Entrance Antiphon: *O Lord, see my lowliness and suffering, and take away all my sins.*

Collect: *Grant that your faithful. O Lord, may be so conformed to you that the bodily discipline now solemnly begun may bear fruit to the souls of all.*

Ezekiel: *The word of the Lord came to me: If the wicked turn away from all their sins and do what is right, they shall surely live. None of the transgressions shall be remembered against them. Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked and not rather that they should turn from their ways and live? But when the righteous turn away and do the same abominable things that the wicked do, shall they live? None of the righteous deeds that they have done shall be remembered. Yet you say: "The way of the Lord is unfair. Is it not your ways that are unfair? When the wicked turn away from the wickedness they shall save their life.*

Psalm: *If you O Lord, should mark iniquities, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered. I wait for the Lord. My should waits and in his word I hope.*

Gospel Acclamation: *Rid yourselves of all your sins and make a new heart and a new spirit.*

Matthew: *Jesus taught them, "I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. You have heard that You shall not murder. But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment. So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother or sister and then come and offer your gift.*

Final Prayer: *Grant.*