

Homily for July 6 and 7th 2019
14th Sunday of Ordinary Time

The Great Maternal Embrace

Upon entering St. Peter's Square in Rome for the first time in 2014 I experienced the arms of Bernini's Pillars like a huge maternal embrace. As you can see from this photograph the Via della Concilia-zione (Road of the Conciliation), broadens into St. Peter's Square where Mother Church opens her arms to all who enter her embrace.

I had this picture of St. Peter's in mind when reading the Old Testament Lesson for today: In the 66th and last chapter of Isaiah, the longest of the Prophetic books, we have this maternal poetry where Jerusalem is personified as a most generous nursing mother:

***Rejoice with Jerusalem, and be glad for her,
all you who love her;
rejoice with her in joy,
all you who mourn over her—
¹¹that you may nurse and be satisfied
from her consoling breast;
that you may drink deeply with delight
from her glorious bosom. ¹***

Now this is an interesting text. It is full of joy-filled language where the people of Israel may be satisfied with the milk from Jerusalem's glorious bosom. But in the middle of this song in a major key, a minor key subtlety slips in: "all you who mourn for her". Why this mourning? We need to understand the context in which Isaiah is writing. The year is around 520 BC. Some 70 years earlier Jerusalem had been destroyed by the Babylonians, and people taken into Exile. Now there were those, who of a subsequent generation had been born in Babylon and were, so to speak, now coming home to Jerusalem. And what did they see upon their arrival, a city in ruins that required rebuilding. Isaiah wants to inspire the people and he sings this song celebrating what Jerusalem can become. Not only does he envision Jerusalem satisfying the spiritual hunger of the Jewish people, but he sees, well something like St. Peter's Square. '

***For thus says the LORD:
I will extend prosperity to her like a river,
and the wealth of the nations like an overflowing stream;²***

The line I want to highlight here is that the wealth of the nations will be like an overflowing stream. Look again at this picture of St. Peter's Square and compare it with this second one. This is the funeral Mass of St John Paul II. Think of the imagery of Isaiah, with the nations flowing up the Via della Concilia-zione to the embrace of Mother Church. George Weigel, who was John Paul's official English biographer commented about the April 8th 2005 this way:

Somehow, 800,000 people—300,000 in St. Peter's Square and the Via della Conciliazione, and another half million in the streets of the Borgo—managed to wedge themselves into the areas immediately adjacent to the basilica for the funeral Mass. Millions of others were at different

venues in Rome. More than 6,000 journalists described the death and burial of John Paul II in words and images. The funeral itself was seen on television by some two billion people. As NBC News anchor Brian Williams put it, the remarkable farewell from both Church and world was “the human event of a generation.”³

Here we see how a picture is worth a thousand words. The world coming into St. Peter’s Square like an overflowing stream.

Keep Isaiah and St. Peter’s Square in mind as I now turn to the Gospel. This text is found only in Luke’s Gospel. Remember Luke is also the writer of the Acts of the Apostles where in chapter 2 he describes the Day of Pentecost as the nation’s streaming into Jerusalem so the people can hear the Apostles, all of whom are Galileans, speaking in the languages of the world.

Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? ⁸ And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?⁴

This helps us to understand something about Luke’s Gospel. It is the Gospel intended for not just the Jewish people but for all the nations of the world. With this in mind think about the appointing of the seventy in the Gospel reading. In Genesis chapter 10, we have a genealogy that outlines the descendants of Noah’s son’s Shem, Ham, and Japheth. It is known as the Table of the Nations. Numerically, it lists a total of 70 nations: 14 from Japheth (10:2–5), 30 from Ham (10:6–20), and 26 from Shem (10:21–31).⁵ It is to symbolize the world wide family that descends from those who survived the Flood.

Added to this is the importance of the number 70 in the Books of Exodus 24:1-11 and Numbers 11:16-30. Here we read two accounts of how Moses gathers to him 70 elders to govern the Twelve Tribes with him.

In the New Testament we are told that the Sanhedrin, are the seventy elders who govern 1st century Judaism. But get this, the Sanhedrin is made up of seventy, plus 1 – the one being the high priest.

So let me put this together for you. What is Luke doing with this story of Jesus Commissioning the 70? He is declaring that the Church is the Community that is to serve the nations of the world, symbolized by 70 nations of Genesis 10. He is also saying that just as Moses of Exodus had seventy men ruling with him, and the High Priest, who in the time of Jesus was Caiaphas, had seventy men governing with him; Jesus as the eternal High Priest, as we read in Hebrews, calls seventy men to govern with him the Church. These seventy men are the first priests, who with the Apostles, as the first Bishops, constitute the first generation Church.

The Venerable Bede, one of the early Church theologians in commenting on this passage from Luke noted:

Just as the number of the twelve apostles marked the beginning of the episcopal rank, it is apparent that the seventy disciples, who were also sent out by the Lord to preach the word, signify in their selection the lesser rank of the priesthood⁶

Do you see why the Church brings together the reading from Isaiah and Luke? Jesus founded the Church so that as the High Priest he would govern the Church through her bishops and priests, so as to welcome the world into the arms of her loving embrace.

Not let me apply what we have learned. Like with Isaiah we are to celebrate Mother Church because through her God draws the world to himself. Jesus as the great and eternal High Priest has so constituted the Church so that through her bishops and priests the sacraments are administered so that the words at the end of our Isaiah reading can be realized:

*and you shall nurse and be carried on her arm,
and dandled on her knees.
¹³As a mother comforts her child,
so I will comfort you;
you shall be comforted in Jerusalem.*

The Church is to be a community of pastoral care and nurture where as a mother cares for and cuddles her infant child, so too the Church is to care for and comfort those who enter her maternal embrace.

However, like Jerusalem of old, there is also the need to mourn for the ways in which the Church has adversely distorted this poetic imagery by those who as her bishops and priests did not extend the maternal loving embrace but rather the destructive and violent grab of sexual abuse. Times like this where there has been such destruction are also opportunities for the Church's renewal, something we see happening as a way to rebuild the Church.

There is a renewed desire in the Church to live out the theme I have highlighted today in our readings.

May this biblical vision inspire us here at St. Peter's to open our arms to welcome in those desiring to be nurtured and embrace by Mother Church, as we participate with the Bishops, priests and lay faithful to become ever more an inviting and welcoming Church with arms wide open.