

The Fruit of Gratitude

I was listening to a priest speaking on a podcast about how to motivate people to come back to Church. He used this analogy: imagine that you were walking on the street one day and a man came up to you and gave you \$168. You accept the money and say thank you, but as he is walking away he turns around and asks you for a dollar back for a cup of coffee. Would you give it to him? Instinctively, most people would say yea of course. In the same way, God gives us 168 hours in the week and all he asks for is at least one single hour. Of course, God desires more and we need to supplement this with more catechesis, but the persuasiveness of this argument hinges on the intuition that ***the proper response to a gift is gratitude***. In other words, the GIFT of the VINE bears FRUIT through GRATITUDE.

This is the same point that Jesus was trying to drill home into the minds of the Jewish leaders. They were the tenants and God gave them the vine which represented Jerusalem. All that he asked for was fruit from the vine. However, this parable was a retelling of salvation history. God pleaded with the Jewish leaders to repent, but instead they became obstinate and killed the prophets those who stung their consciences.

But I thought that we all have this intuition that the proper response to the gift is gratitude? In some ways, yes, but what can happen is that ***duty can obscure the heart***. Duty is meant to be a CHALLENGE to LOVE, but sometimes duty can become ROUTINE—an OBSTACLE to LOVE. The prophet Isaiah wrote,

“These people come near to me with their mouths and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me” (Is 29:13).

The covenant relationship with God was a gift and worship was meant to be a response to that gift. Sadly, worship became a duty instead of an opportunity for gratitude.

Today, Jesus is challenging us to wake up from our routine which can dampen the flame of love in our heart and reduce it to the ice cold frost of duty. If we do not produce the fruits of gratitude, then there are serious consequences:

“Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a nation producing the fruits of it.”

And John the Baptist exhorts:

“Even now the axe is laid at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

These are serious consequences for being ungrateful, but Jesus and John the Baptist are using strong language to prevent us from going down that path which hardens our hearts. If the ungrateful heart is unwilling to recognize the Giver of its earthly life, how will it be open to the Savior who gives the gift of eternal life? “But when the tenants saw the son, they said to one another, ‘This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and acquire his inheritance.’”

Multiple psychological studies have shown that when we are more grateful, we experience greater well-being and greater happiness! As I think about it, it makes sense. The exercise of gratitude here on earth is a foretaste of what we will be doing forever in heaven. It begins to make more sense why the heart that refuses to be grateful for a period of time here on earth will be unable to do it for all eternity and in fact closes itself off from that gift.

For many of us, our hearts are a mixture of gratitude and ingratitude. Yet our Savior knows what ails the human heart and so he has given us the Eucharist which comes from the Greek word meaning ‘thanksgiving’. The Eucharist is our thanksgiving sacrifice where we offer the perfect unblemished sacrifice to God. It is not merely a reminder to be thankful, but a participation in Jesus’ eternal thanksgiving to the Father in heaven. So as we participate in the liturgy of the Eucharist, the heavenly liturgy of ‘Thanksgiving’, where heaven comes to meet earth, let us make our lives a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving because what we celebrate here on earth will be our joyful duty forever in heaven.