

Gaining our Souls

Homily for 33rd Sunday Ordinary Time

November 13, 2022

A man found a cocoon of an emperor moth and took it home to watch the moth come out. One day a small opening appeared. The man sat and watched the moth for several hours as it struggled to force its body through that little hole. Then it seemed to stop making any progress. The man thought it was stuck, and decided to help. He took a pair of scissors and snipped off the remaining bit of the cocoon so that the moth could get out. Soon the moth emerged, but it had a swollen body and small, shriveled wings. The man continued to watch, expecting that in time the wings would enlarge and expand to be able to support the body, which would simultaneously contract to its proper size. Neither happened. In fact, that little moth spent the rest of its life crawling around with a swollen body and shriveled wings. It was never able to fly. The man in his haste didn't understand that the restricting cocoon and the struggle required for the moth to get through the tiny opening had a purpose. They force fluid from the body into the wings so that the moth can be ready for flight once it emerges from the cocoon.

Just as the moth could only achieve freedom and flight as a result of struggling, we often need to struggle to fulfill our life's mission. This life on earth, for us and for the Church as a whole, is like the moth's life in the cocoon. The struggles God permits us have a purpose - by facing them bravely, with faith, and with the help of his grace, we and the Church will become what he created us to be.

In today's Gospel we hear Jesus speak to his disciples about the cataclysmic struggle that will follow his Resurrection, Ascension into heaven and the coming of the Holy Spirit. We might think Jesus' victory over death would be accompanied by a time of triumph and success. But Jesus has sobering predictions to make that will require on the part of his hearers suffering and hardship. This is stated right at the end of the passage for today where we hear Jesus say:

By your endurance you will gain your souls

What does Jesus mean by this? To endure means to be willing to face trial and hardship. It is to also have the confidence that the end of the trial will be one where our souls will be fully formed as we accept that life in this world is full of struggle. Sometime we can think that if God was for real and was genuinely concerned for us life would be less difficult and there would be less suffering. However, the one who is God and came to us in the person of Jesus clearly states the opposite. What the Lord offers to us is the call to fortitude and perseverance in this life because it will only be in the world that is beyond this one that we will so to speak emerge from the cocoon with a fully formed soul. But how often do we want to take the scissors and snip away the cocoon because life can be so painful!

As we turn to the rest of today's Gospel reading we discover the disciples are amazed at the beauty and splendour of the Jerusalem Temple. St Luke tells us how those in Jesus' company spoke about how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God. Jesus then

prophecies that a building that had been under construction for almost 50 years would be destroyed within two generations.

“As for these things, that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another, all will be thrown down.”

Jesus having foretold what would happen in two generations teaches that the destruction of the Temple would be symbolic end of the Old Covenant, was also a foreshadowing of the end of history itself, when this fallen world will be destroyed and replaced by a fully redeemed world. That is Judgment Day, the second coming of Christ.

Between Christ's conversation with his disciples and the destruction of Jerusalem, the Twelve Apostles experienced persecution, hardship and martyrdom - just as Jesus predicted.

Between the time of the Apostles and Judgment Day, his Church will experience the same thing. And so, what Jesus tells them is meant for us too: tough times are part of his plan that result in the gaining of our souls, the most important end for which our lives are to be lived.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church speaks of the relationship between trusting in Jesus and suffering in this world when in paragraph 677 we read:

The Church will enter the glory of the kingdom only through this final Passover, when she will follow her Lord in his death and Resurrection. The kingdom will be fulfilled, then, not by a historic triumph of the Church through a progressive ascendancy, but only by God's victory over the final unleashing of evil, which will cause his Bride to come down from heaven. God's triumph over the revolt of evil will take the form of the Last Judgment after the final cosmic upheaval of this passing world.

That's the teaching of the Church, drawing on the teaching of Jesus Himself. And so, the Church gives us the words of Christ to the disciples to prepare, to be ready for suffering, to be ready for persecution and tribulation at the end of the liturgical year, because She is helping us, through the words of Jesus, to prepare for (so to speak) the last days.

What does this therefore mean for us now? By remembering that Christ knows what the future holds in store and remembering that he is the Lord of that future, that he is guiding all things to their proper end that nothing is out of range of his wisdom and power -this is one of the secrets to interior peace, to peace of mind. During every Mass, right after we pray the Our Father, the priest prays:

We may be always safe from all distress, we await the blessed hope and the coming of our saviour, Jesus Christ.

Since we know that Jesus is coming, and that we will be judged by him not on how much money we made, nor on how many diplomas we earned, nor even on how popular we were, but simply on our effort to love Christ and serve our neighbor, we can be at peace -

This puts all our worries into their proper place. It cuts all our fears down to size. This earth is passing away. Until it does, we are called to use each day to love God and neighbor. Every

situation, difficulty, and opportunity takes on value only insofar as it helps or hinders us from doing that.

Many centuries ago, St Catherine of Sienna who died in 1380 reflected on the words from today's Gospel this way:

Hope, O my soul, hope. You know neither the day nor the hour. Watch carefully, for everything passes quickly, even though your impatience makes doubtful what is certain, and turns a very short time into a long one. Dream that the more you struggle, the more you prove the love that you bear your God, and the more you will rejoice one day with your Beloved, in a happiness and rapture that can never end.

Remember of Emperor Butterfly that never was fully formed, because its suffering was lessened? This is that the Emperor Butterfly is to look like.

May we take to heart today's Gospel as we thank God for revealing this truth to us, and for reminding us of it. And when he comes to us in Holy Communion, let's ask him for the grace to put it into practice, living each day with purpose and with peace, fulfilling our mission and building a better world knowing and trusting that by our endurance we will gain our souls.