

Homily for March 2nd and 3rd 2019

8th Sunday of Ordinary Time

Visible Witnesses

When on our Parish Holy Land Pilgrimage in January of this year, one of the most moving days for me was in the Garden of Gethsemane. This is the location where on Holy Thursday, as Jesus entered his Passion, he went with Peter, James and John to pray. The word Gethsemane is the Hebrew word for olive press. An apt name, not only because of the pressure Jesus was under as the weight of his impending suffering resulted in him sweating blood. It is also appropriate because Gethsemane is a grove of olive trees as we can see in these photographs. In this garden are eight trees, called the “Silent Witnesses”. They are so named because seven of them are around 2000 years old and the eighth dates from time of King David, 3000 years ago. These trees would have been in the Garden the night of the Lord’s Passion and have ever since been the silent witnesses, whose very life testifies to the one who gave up his own life for the salvation of the world. Oh, and one other thing about these trees; they are still bearing olives, in the autumn of every year. And there they were in the warm winter sun on January 23rd 2019 as you see in these pictures taken on that day.

Today’s psalm compares the person of mature faith to a vital tree. In this case it isn’t an olive tree but a palm tree and Lebanon cedar.

***The righteous flourish like the palm tree,
and grow like a cedar in Lebanon.¹***

Now we all know about palm trees, but the Cedar of Lebanon, not so much. It was one of the most precious of all woods in the ancient world. It was strong and straight, and therefore was much sought after for temples and palaces, as well as the masts of ships. Cedar trees were used especially in royal construction projects.² The psalm says the person of mature faith is like a Lebanon Cedar and goes on to sing:

***They are planted in the house of the LORD;
they flourish in the courts of our God.***

“The house of the Lord” and “the courts of our God” refers to the Jewish Temple which was the centre of the Jewish Person’s world. Their whole life was influenced by the Temple and so to say they are planted there, means the life of the Jews was rooted in the Temple. We would say, as Catholics, that we are planted in the Eucharist and others sacraments that ground our lives in Jesus.

¹ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*](#). (1993). (Ps 92:12). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

² Hahn, S. (Ed.). (2009). In [*Catholic Bible Dictionary*](#) (p. 142). New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday.

Listen to the psalm's next verse:

***In old age they still produce fruit;
they are always green and full of sap,***

This is the verse that brought to mind for me the Gethsemane Olive Trees. In very old age they are still producing just like the person whose life is deeply rooted in Jesus Christ.

And what is the purpose of the mature person's fruitfulness? The last verse of the psalm gives us the answer.

***¹⁵ showing that the LORD is upright;
he is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in him.³***

That's it. Like the Olive Trees, whose longevity witness to Jesus, we are to do the same by the fruitfulness that is to mark our lives. You and I are to bear the fruit that is a visible witness that we are disciples of Jesus.

So the question to now ask is, how to we cultivate our lives so that:

***In old age they still produce fruit;
they are always green and full of sap,***

The answer can be found in today's Gospel. Jesus desires that we be fruitful and visible witnesses to him. Listen to how he put it:

A disciple is not above the teacher, but everyone who is fully qualified will be like the teacher⁴

Jesus teaches us here that to be a fruitful Christian means that we will be like him. He says, "fully qualified". How is it we are to mature so that we are fully qualified to be like Jesus? Two areas are the focus of Jesus answer in this passage. How we see and how we speak.

There are two aspects of seeing the Lord looks at here.

1. How we see the world and
2. How we see ourselves and others.

Our Gospel reading begins with a riddle:

³ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*](#). (1993). (Ps 92:13–15). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

⁴ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*](#). (1993). (Lk 6:40). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

Can a blind person guide a blind person? Will not both fall into a pit?⁵

This kind of question is called a rhetorical question, which means it only has one answer. In this case the answer is “no, of course not”. That would be crazy for one blind person to be leading another, not to mention really dangerous - perhaps resulting in death. Jesus is saying that for us to be qualified like the Jesus, our teacher, is to see the world with a view formed by Jesus teaching as preserved and passed on by the Church. The faithful Catholic is that man or woman who desires to see the world from the perspective of the church’s teaching and is receptive and accepting of teaching. Then in turn they can lead others in the ways of the Lord, because they see and understand the world from the vantage point of Jesus.

But there is another kind of seeing so important here, and it has to do with how we see ourselves and others. How easy it can be to criticize others and make excuses for our own behaviour. Jesus wants us to see this differently. We should be most critical of our own sinful behaviour and be merciful with others. He uses a vivid image to make his point. We have a tendency to miss the building beam in our own eye, maybe a Lebanon Cedar, and are preoccupied with the speck in our neighbour’s eye. To grow in fruitfulness requires that we become far more attentive of our need for forgiveness and mercy so that in turn we can deal tenderly and gently with sin in the other person’s life. Such an awareness is always recalled when we say the Confiteor at the beginning of Mass. We don’t turn to the person next to us, pointing the finger and saying: By “your fault”, but by “my fault”. So too when we take the Sacrament of Confession seriously, we are learning the way to honestly look at our own beams and ask the Lord to help us remove them.

Jesus then moves from how we see to how we speak at the conclusion this passage:

The good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good, and the evil person out of evil treasure produces evil; for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks.⁶

Jesus want us to understand that how we use speech is one of the clearest indications of how visible our witness is to him. From the heart, that is from the soil into which our lives are rooted will influence the way we use language. For the person who is growing to be like Jesus desiring to be a visible witness, we take seriously these words from Paul in Colossians 4.6:

Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer everyone.⁷

⁵ [The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition](#). (1993). (Lk 6:39). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

⁶ [The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition](#). (1993). (Lk 6:45). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

⁷ [The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition](#). (1993). (Col 4:6). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

Such gracious speech is to influence others the ways salt enhances the flavour of a steak or eggs.

On Friday I was listening to Ken King, the CEO of the Calgary Flames talk about Jerome Inginla, whose number 12 is being retired tonight at before the Flames play the Wild. King said in all the years he knew Jerome he never heard him swear or say an unkind thing about another person. So, while a superlative hockey forward, Jerome is also a man whose heart produced gracious and generous words.

As we prepare for the Lenten season may we prayerfully consider the question:

Am I becoming qualified to be ever more like my teacher Jesus? What does the way I see the world, myself and others and the way I use my speech say about the state of my heart?

For Just as those trees have been silent witnesses to Jesus, we are to be visible witnesses for as He says:

for each tree is known by its own fruit.⁸

⁸ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*](#). (1993). (Lk 6:44). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.