

Homily for 4th Sunday of Advent

December 17 and 18 2016

Isaiah 7:10–14

Psalm 24:1–6

Romans 1:1–7

Matthew 1:18–24

The Wheel of Fortune

There is a passage in Thomas Merton's spiritual autobiography, *Seven Story Mountain* with which I want to begin my homily today. Thomas Merton was one of the most respected spiritual writers of the 20th century. In this book, he is recounting how he had recently become a Catholic. He is walking down 5th Avenue in New York City with his best friend Robert Lax who has also just become a Catholic. Lax turns to Merton and asks "Tom what do you want out of life"? Merton stops, ponders the question and says: "Well, I guess I want to be a good Catholic". Lax then says, "Tom that's not it. You should want to be a saint."

"A saint", says Merton, "You've got to be kidding". But, over time this comment came to revolutionize Merton's life so that he would eventually enter into the path which would ultimately lead him to the Trappist Monastery.

Leon Blois was a spiritual writer from the 20th century. He commented that there is only one great sadness in life, not to be a saint. All the other things we consider sadness, failures, lost relationships, are real sadnesses, yes, but they are not the ultimate sadness. The only real one is not to find God's will for your life and then to do it. Not to be a saint that is the real tragedy.

One day Thomas Aquinas' sister asked him, "What must I do to become a saint". His answer was "Will it, desire it, want it." To some degree our problem is we settle for mediocrity and desire less than God has for us. For you see to be a saint is to be a friend of God. To be a saint is to make the relationship with God the central fact of one's life.

St Paul understood this as the goal of life when in Romans 1 he echoes Robert Lax's words to Thomas Merton:

To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints.

Do you hear the association between friendship and sainthood? Those who are God's beloved, those who form the Church, are all called to be saints. So, the question is how do we become saints? At the heart of the answer is to learn to live by cultivating an interior attitude where we are intentionally choosing to place Jesus Christ as our highest good. St Paul so clearly understood this. He begins his Letter to the Romans by stating:

Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God.

Paul understood that at the heart of life was to live in response to the call of God so that the Gospel, the Good News of Jesus Christ, would be made visible by and through Paul's life. Such a way of life, while profoundly meaningful, is also very challenging and difficult. In order to grow as a saint is to realize that my life is not my own to do with as I please. The saint knows my life is God's, is Christ's, and this body is to be the means by which and through which I glorify God.

The way Matthew presents Joseph in our reading from the Gospel is instructive. We can better understand what is involved in becoming a saint by looking to Joseph. In Joseph, we see someone who chooses to put Jesus first. St. Matthew tells us:

“Joseph called his name Jesus”.

Now, of course, Joseph had a unique one of a kind relationship with Jesus because of who he was, Jesus' earthly step-father. And yet, I want us to ponder for a minute on Joseph naming Jesus because this gets to the heart of what it means to be a saint. To truly and reverently speak the name of Jesus shapes the lives of those aspiring to be saints. Remember, Jesus said that from the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks. This finds expression in how we use the name, Jesus. As we worshipfully and thoughtfully say this name and realize that my life is all about embodying the presence of Jesus so that my life becomes an extension of his life, then we will be maturing in sainthood. For a saint is someone whose life is like a mirror. It exists to reflect the life of another; in this case the life of the Other, of God in Christ. And in so doing the saint not only names Jesus on his or her lips but also makes Jesus known through his or her life so that God with us, Immanuel, becomes experienced in the sinews, in the fibers of our own lives. Just as Jesus came into the world in his person 2000 years ago, he comes into the lives of those who with Paul and Joseph understand we are not our own. My life is really about His life. For to be a saint remember, is to be a friend of God. To be a saint is in the language of St. Paul to also be Christ's slave.

Now, what does it mean to be a slave of Christ? To answer this question I would like to refer to what is called the Wheel of Fortune. You will find on the screen. This wheel of fortune dates from the middle ages and is so instructive in helping us to visualize what it means to become a saint, to live in friendship with God as a slave of Christ.¹

The Wheel illustrates for us that there is a call to deeper conversion in each of our lives. We have a tendency to live much of our lives on the rim of the wheel. This is much easier. To live focused on the wheel's centre is to live increasingly as Saints Joseph and Paul did, At the top of the wheel of fortune, there is a depiction of a king. He says “Regno”. (“I am reigning”. Now the circle turns clock-wise and over here is a king losing his crown. He says “regnavi” (“I have reigned.”) I have lost power. Turn to the very bottom of the circle. There is a pauper. He says “Sum Sine Regno” (“I have no power. I've got nothing.”) Over here to the left is a ladder climber and he says “Regnabo” (“I shall reign.”)

¹ See end of the text for the Wheel of Fortune

This is where so many people live their lives, on the rim of the wheel of fortune. Ambition, self-importance being in control, making a name for oneself is what life is all about. This is the more obvious way to set one's life course because it is a value prevalent all around us.

Now look at the centre of the wheel. Here is the depiction of Christ. The one point in the wheel that does not change. Even as the rim turns, the still point at the centre is the one constant.

The point of the wheel of fortune is very simple but very hard to live. Don't live your life on the rim of the wheel. Live your life in the centre of the wheel and then even as the fortune of your life changes you can watch it with a certain detachment because you are centred in Christ.

Now think of Joseph in relation to the wheel. If he was more concerned about reputation, status, what others thought of him, he would have done anything to get out of his betrothal to Mary. But, he doesn't because he was willing to be attentive to the voice at the centre of the wheel. And as such, we see something about Joseph's character that is common to those growing in sainthood; in those learning to live in the centre of the wheel. When we are learning to live in the wheel's centre our character becomes more Christ-like. Look at Joseph. Matthew tells us he was a just man, a thoughtful man and an obedient man. These aspects of his character are described in turn in these words:

and her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. 20 But as he considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit; 21 she will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.... When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took his wife,"

Saints are those people who are learning to live justly in their relationships with others. Saints are those people who are learning to live thoughtfully as they consciously choose to live at the centre of the wheel with a deepening understanding of what is involved in putting Christ first. Saints are those people who are learning to live obediently in relation to the will and call of God. In Joseph, we see all three.

When these three attributes of justice, thoughtfulness, and obedience come together with growing consistency; then with Joseph, Paul, and Thomas Merton we can live centred lives knowing that we are beloved by God, and therefore called to be saints.

We were not made to live on the rim of the wheel of fortune but to find our centre in the wheel's centre. In learning to live this way, we make Jesus present as we reflect him much as a mirror reflects the image of the one who is before it. Or as a full moon reflects the light of the sun. Think of the waning moons we experienced this past week.

What do you want for your life? Make sainthood your goal dear brothers and sisters, for this is your calling. A calling that is made clear to us because Jesus who is God with us came to save us from our sins so we could set our sights on him and his kingdom.

The Wheel of Fortune

