

Spiritual zeal in an age of the “whatever” attitude

Homily for December 3rd 2017

Advent Sunday

The story is told of John Henry Newman, who, in the 1800’s, was an Anglican minister in England. His religious pilgrimage ultimately took him to Rome and the Roman Catholic Church. He would become a cardinal in the Catholic Church and one of the most preeminent leaders of that church in England.

While serving as Cardinal, he received a message from an English priest from the tiny village of Brennan, a dirty little mill town north of Birmingham. Birmingham was where Newman lived. An epidemic of cholera had decimated the village and the priest was asking for the help of another priest to assist him in the giving of the sacrament, administering the Last Rites, and to do funerals, because so many people were dying.

Newman read the letter and he spent the next hour in prayer. Finally a secretary came in and said: Cardinal Newman, we must give an immediate reply to Brennan. Your eminence, what shall we do? Newman answered: The people are suffering and dying. How can I send a priest to do this work? I must go myself.

During this Advent Season we sing the hymn:

***O Come O Come Emmanuel
And Ransom Captive Israel
Who mourns in lowly exile here,
Until the Son of God Appear.***

Advent is the season when we remember how God in the person of Jesus Christ has come to ransom us. That is, he came into our misery, like Newman did by entering into the suffering of Brennan.

One of the key themes that runs throughout the Scriptures is that we humans are held captive by the illness we call concupiscence. Concupiscence has been called the “tinder for sin”. Tinder is another word for kindling. The forms of kindling that most often ignite into sin are called the world, the flesh and the devil. The world refers to all those allurements that feed our greed and restlessness that makes it difficult for us to be satisfied with our lives. It is all the political scandal, gossip and intrigue that can consume our time and emotional energy. The flesh points to all of the addictive habits and disordered understandings of gender and sexuality today that confuse and twist what it means to be created in God’s image as male and female. The devil is the underlying spiritual power in opposition to God, whose influence wants us to be preoccupied by the world and the flesh and forget about God entirely.

When we sing “Ransom Captive Israel”, we are praying for Jesus to rescue us from the power of concupiscence; the world, the flesh and the devil so that we may be liberated to have the “resolve to run forth to meet Jesus, with righteous deeds at his coming”, as we prayed in today’s Collect.

But here is the thing that makes our situation different from the Cholera outbreak in Brennan. In that case the need was obvious whereas for us it is easy to conclude what do we need to be delivered from?

Isaiah would answer we need to be delivered from spiritual sloth so that we can be freed to live in the community of grace, the theme of our reading from 1 Corinthians. This is so we can in the words of today's Gospel be alert, having the resolve to run forth to meet Jesus, with righteous deeds at his coming".

What is spiritual sloth?

The medieval theologians called it the "noon day devil". There is something sleepy about noon day. After lunch, especially on a hot summer's day, what is better than to take it easy? A siesta on the hammock, just kicking back. Now there is nothing wrong with a summer siesta, but there is something wrong if the noon day devil represents how we live the spiritual life.

St Thomas Aquinas said "sloth is sorrow for spiritual good." You can be mister go getter and filled with sloth at the same time. It's not a lack of energy, but rather sorrow or depression for spiritual things. Spiritual things leave me "ho hum", It's a kind of boredom of the soul.

Bishop Barron has said sloth is the distinctive sin of our time and is influenced by our secularism. We are full of energy, with all we can build, our technologies and scientific discoveries. But when it comes to spiritual things we are kind of indifferent, we have a "whatever" attitude.¹

Now can you imagine Apple having a "whatever" attitude in developing the next iPhone? It is just the opposite. So too with other areas of research and development, engineers, programmers are hard at work, giving their all to improve on the latest technologies. Do you think sports teams have a "whatever" attitude when it comes to prepping for the next game? I don't think so.

But for our culture when it comes to values and ultimate meaning and the purpose of my life we tend to fall into a "whatever" attitude.

Think about this analogy from Cardinal Newman. What gives a river energy? It is the firmness of its banks. If a river has firm banks then it moves. What happens if you knock down the banks? The river will open up into this big lazy *lake*. What has happened to our society spiritually is that we have knocked down the banks of what is good and what is true and beautiful and given into the world, the flesh and the devil. The river has opened into this big lazy lake and we are floating on our own private air mattresses. There is no spiritual purpose, energy or life in that kind of society.

Now with this in mind listen again to parts of our first reading from Isaiah:

***We have long been like those whom you do not rule,
like those not called by your name.
There is no one who calls on your name,
or attempts to take hold of you;
for you have hidden your face from us,
and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity.***

¹ See Bishop Barron's Video on the Seven Deadly Sins at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wG4VF0jU568>. Go to minute 33:31 for his teaching on Sloth. Although the video in its entirety is worth watching,

Do you hear the Spiritual sloth expressed here? Because of their “whatever” attitude they experience God’s hiddenness. They ask:

***¹⁷Why, O LORD, do you make us stray from your ways
and harden our heart, so that we do not fear you?***

Somehow the people think their hardness of heart is God’s fault, but no it is because of their sloth. Now hear again these other verse from our readings that represent spiritual sloth’s opposite, which is spiritual zeal.

***O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,
so that the mountains would quake at your presence—
³When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect,
you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.
⁴From ages past no one has heard,
no ear has perceived,
no eye has seen any God besides you,
who works for those who wait for him.
⁵You meet those who gladly do right,
those who remember you in your ways.***

What a different attitude is spiritual zeal! There is a longing here for God to make himself known, something Isaiah says is experienced by those who wait for God and gladly do what is right. Isaiah then goes on to observe:

***But you were angry, and we sinned;
because you hid yourself we transgressed.
⁶We have all become like one who is unclean,
and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth.
We all fade like a leaf,
and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.***

Do you hear how dangerous spiritual sloth is? It’s greatest consequence is an experience of God’s absence and a sense of purposelessness. Whereas those who practise spiritual zeal are attentive to God’s ways, know his presence and life is infused with purpose and meaning.

It is this kind of zeal that is to set apart the Church because it is the fellowship where people are to be expectant and receptive towards Jesus. Paul says as much when in the opening of 1st Corinthians he states:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

What do the gifts of grace and peace provide for us? Spiritual energy. Listen to the dynamism of Paul’s words:

for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind—⁶ just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you—⁷ so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Our way of thinking and speaking are enriched because of the grace of Jesus Christ. Notice as well, when a community collectively lives with spiritual zeal, the testimony of Jesus is strengthened among us. How important it is to have others who can encourage us to have the resolve to run forth to meet Jesus with righteous deeds. How we want to be able to encourage one another to not give into the noon day devil of spiritual sloth so that we can counter the illness of concupiscence with an attitude of spiritual zeal that our Lord in the Gospel exhorts us to practise. He warns that because of his delay in returning it is so easy to fall into a spiritual slumber and yet repeatedly he calls us to stay awake, be alert, keep watch.

May we allow for this Advent to be a season where we pray for the Lord to increase within us a zeal for Him as we pray with Isaiah:

*O LORD, you are our Father;
we are the clay, and you are our potter;
we are all the work of your hand.*