

Homily for April 21, 2020

Profession influences our Possessions

In today's Gospel, Jesus talks about those people who are born of the Spirit. They are men and women who are receptive to the working of God in their lives as they daily look to Jesus, the crucified and resurrected Lord. Jesus says of such people:

***And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,
¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.***

Eternal life is not just the life that awaits us when we will behold the beatific vision in heaven. It is a life that has a quality right now, so that in the present we can have an anticipation of the life that will be ours in heaven.

In our reading from Acts we have an insight into what this eternal life can be like now. Here is the early Church gathered together with no power in the eyes of the world but with a common heart and soul that is united in two ways around the Resurrected power of Jesus Christ. First of all they are united in their proclamation of Jesus. St. Luke tells us:

With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.

Theirs was a unity in profession. They continually testified to the resurrection of Jesus Christ and as a result they knew the favour of God. This grace and favour was found not only in unity of profession but also in unity of possessions. Luke also tells us:

There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold.

Their experience of the generosity of Jesus spilled over into how they extended generosity to one another. Generous with their profession made them generous with their possessions. Such a combination of generous words and generous deeds meant they knew in the present something of the qualitative nature of eternal life because here were people born of the Holy Spirit.

St Luke highlights one person from this earliest community of generosity. Barnabas was the nickname the early Church gave him. He was "The Son of Encouragement". Barnabas was someone who looked to Jesus and so had eternal life. This experience of eternal life allowed him to discover the true value of things and so found the way to generosity of living. What he professed shaped how he possessed. Barnabas discovered what mattered most, Jesus Christ risen from the dead, and as a result everything else could be placed in its proper perspective.

The Bible does not say "things," "wealth" and "money" don't matter or are not important. In fact, it's just the opposite. One-third of all of Jesus' parables have to do with our relationship to material things. The Bible tells us they are vitally important, that they matter a great deal. Evidently, Barnabas learned their true value, their true worth. Evidently, Barnabas learned that every good gift comes from God and, therefore, he accepted that all he had was a gracious gift of God's grace. Evidently, he learned to appreciate the true value of all he possessed as a sacred

trust from God. And in that light, material things were not of less value, they were of infinitely more value of eternal value and sacred worth.

Because Barnabas understood the true value of things he also realized the centrality of generosity and lived a life of generous encouragement. He found the way to use what he had received from God to encourage, to console, to refresh. If you track the journey of Barnabas through the book of Acts, he always shows up in the same frame:

- Following the conversion of Saul into Paul, he is the one who makes the way of welcome, who introduces him to the community of the faithful. (Acts 9:26-27)

- In Judea, he is the one who carries the relief offering to the suffering Christians...a symbol of the open hearts of the disciples. (Acts 11:29-30)

- In Antioch he serves with Paul, assisting others in their ministry, opening minds to the Gospel. (Acts 11:22-26)

- In Jerusalem, he is there at the first conference, arguing for the inclusion of the Gentiles in the community...opening the doors for the outsiders. (Acts 15:1-31)

Opening hearts, opening minds, opening doors...has a nice ring to it, don't you think?

Here, in this first incident, it's Barnabas who models Christian generosity, modeling the life of the community where Luke says that Barnabas sells a field and brings the proceeds for the ministry of the Christian community.

The Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is that profession that when wholeheartedly believed re-orientates our lives. May we like the early Church profess with conviction Christ is risen and so express lives of generous encouragement as we use our possessions to open hearts, open minds and open doors to the saving grace of Jesus and so come to know the gift of eternal life.