

The Joy of Discipleship

6th Sunday of Easter 2020

This morning I want to talk with you about the Joy of Discipleship. Turning to the Bible, we see what it has to say about joy and its source. It says that there is fullness of joy in the presence of God. Real joy comes from moving into the presence of God and abiding in the love of Christ. When the spirit of God is alive in us, one of the blessings the spirit brings to us is joy.

Joy comes from knowing the Savior. Joy in discipleship is not attachment to things but is attachment to Jesus. Joy is a sign of the presence of God in one's life. To be a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ is to experience a deeper level of joy. Joy is the serious business of heaven.

St Peter in today's Epistle gives us an important insight into how we cultivate joy when he writes:

“In your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord”

The heart is the most intimate and interior part of our being, it is closely associated with the soul, the essence of who we are and shapes who we are becoming. St. Peter invites us to set apart Christ as Lord, to make him most important. Another version of this verse puts it this way:

Through thick and thin, keep your hearts at attention, in adoration before Christ, your Master.

People who are choosing this way of concentrated attention on Jesus understand what the Church means as we prayed in the opening prayer of today's Mass:

“May we celebrate with heartfelt devotion these days of joy”.

Heartfelt devotion is expressed when we keep our hearts at attention before Jesus, sanctifying Him as Lord.

This kind of heartfelt devotion was expressed helpfully by St. Ignatius of Loyola in the 16th century. He is the founder of the Jesuits. In his programme for spiritual formation he introduces something he calls the First Principle. In modern language we might refer to this as a life mission statement. Listen to St. Ignatius' First Principle.

God created human beings to praise, reverence, and serve God, and by doing this, to save their souls.

People who understand the reason for their lives will know joy. Why? Because they have a clarity about why they are here and where they are going. St. Ignatius teaches there are three primary ways in which we live out the purpose of our earthly lives. They are to be caught up in the praise, reverence and service of God. When we keep these three essentials before us daily we will be cooperating with the Grace of Jesus and participate actively in the salvation of our souls. Each of our readings today teaches something about the threefold reason for our earthly lives. Acts and the Psalm elaborate on what it means to praise God, 1 Peter on what it means to revere God and the Gospel on what it means to serve God.

We read in the Acts passage that there was great joy in the Samaritan City where Philip went to proclaim and minister in the name of Jesus. Many were being baptized in Jesus' name and yet we are told they had not received the Holy Spirit. Here we have the earliest recorded Confirmation as Peter and John come to Samaria and lay hands on the believers there. What does the reception of the Holy Spirit do? It will free these believers to more fully praise the Lord.

Let me explain this by using an analogy. This is the time of year when many people go to garden centres and buy flats of flowers. Now we don't bring the plants home and just leave them in the flats. Rather, after they have hardened off we take them out and plant them in the planters where they will have room to grow and beautifully adorn the back deck.

Similarly with the Christian. We are baptized in the name of the Trinity. But in order for our faith to really grow we have to have the room in our soul for the Holy Spirit to work. People in whom the Holy Spirit is able to work are like those young plants that are given the room and the conditions to become mature and beautiful.

To praise God is the way we adorn our lives so as to bring the beauty of a dedicated soul to him. God delights in our praises in ways that might be like the delight we receive from our summer flowers.

Today's psalm is an exclamation of praise as it shouts:

*Make a joyful noise to God, all the earth;
sing the glory of his name;
give to him glorious praise*

Notice the psalm includes all the earth praising God. Flowers praise God through their scent and beauty. We give to him glorious praise in a particular way when we worship Him at Mass. Such praise can also shape our daily lives when we remember hearts that sanctify Christ as Lord opening themselves up to the presence of the Holy Spirit much as plants do to the rain and the sun. When we do this we will know more fully the joy of discipleship because praise is at the centre of how we will choose to live each day.

Remember Ignatius's first principle:

God created human beings to praise, reverence, and serve God, and by doing this, to save their souls.

To reverence God is to discover that all of life is a sacred and precious gift and needs to be treated with tender care. We are to live in such a way that we have an active sense of awe and wonder knowing we have been placed in this world and all around us there are signs of life's immeasurable goodness and beauty. People who are cultivating a reverential attitude towards life notice this and are thankful. St. Ignatius believed that the root of all sin was ingratitude because it cuts us off from seeing each day as a gift. People with grateful hearts also have reverential hearts. Thankfulness cultivates an attitude of reverence.

Coupled with this kind of reverence is the reverence we are to extend to one another as those made in God's image. In the reading from 1 Peter he speaks of those who are attacking Christians with violence and a hardened attitude that is bitter. But notice what Peter says is to be the attitude of the Christian towards those who are embittered and cruel:

Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; 16 yet do it with gentleness and reverence.

Treating others with gentleness and reverence is a way to revere the God whom we cannot see. If we are to treat those who are aggressive towards us because of their reaction to our faith in such a way, how much more are we to grow in cultivating such gentleness and respect in our interactions with spouses, children and those who are near and dear to us? Homes where reverence is cultivated and lived out will be characterized by joy.

How hard it can be for us to live reverentially and so it is a quality that is sharpened as we come to the third quality in the First Principle:

God created human beings to praise, reverence, and serve God, and by doing this, to save their souls.

Service of God is formed in people who understand what Jesus said in today's Gospel:

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments.

We serve God when we love God and we love God most when we keep the commandments of Jesus. At the heart of his commandment is to love each other by laying down our lives. When I meet with grade two children to talk with them about their First Communion, I bring this crucifix. I ask them what letter is formed if the arms of the cross are removed. I then ask them what letter is formed when the arms are in place. They say the letters I and T. I then talk with them about how we all struggle with the power of sin in our lives which has to do with being self-centred, self-absorbed, self-preoccupied. But the more we turn our lives over to Jesus and allow his life in the Sacraments take over our souls, the I becomes a T. I then introduce them to the old fashioned word “Thou””, which means “you”. There is something that happens in the life of a Eucharistic Person. They desire more fully to live out Jesus' command to love the other – be that other God or the person next to me. Life becomes less about me, the I, and more about the thou, and when this happens we discover the way of loving service. Jesus also says that when we intentionally live this way we will come to know more fully the presence of the Holy Spirit. Such a presence will help us to know that we have not been orphaned or abandoned by God. Rather we will know the one who is our advocate and counsellor. The one who imparts the presence of Jesus to us so we can know joy.

In this life we will never completely know what it is to praise, reverence and serve the Lord. However we know that as we live out the First Principle we will be cooperating with the Holy Spirit in the present. Then that day will come when we will live out St. Ignatius' principle fully. For heaven will be all about the praise, reverence and service of God. Heaven will be about joy.

The Joy of Discipleship is known by those who live understanding that all dimensions of our life in this world find their deepest meaning when we know why we have been created and for what end. Thanks be to St. Ignatius for such a succinct statement of our life's purpose and destiny.