

Homily for February 28th 2017

This evening's Gospel includes the saying of Jesus known as the "Great Reversal". It is one of the most famous words of Jesus, but one our souls find so difficult to accept:

But many that are first will be last, and the last will be first.

It describes a great reversal that will take place at the end of history when Jesus comes in glory. Many of those who in "this present age" were regarded as successful, important, honored, and powerful will be revealed as the poorest in what truly counts. Many of those who are downtrodden, overlooked, weak, and insignificant in the eyes of the world will be revealed as the preeminent ones in the kingdom.

This is such a hard spiritual and material principle for us to grasp. There is something fundamental to our fallen nature whereby our interior life is pulled towards worldly prestige and influence, the way metal filings are drawn towards a powerful magnet.

We are given insight into the interior attitude of the Apostles, which here in Mark 10 are still drawn by the magnet of worldly prestige.

Peter says that he and the other 11 have left everything to follow Jesus. While this might be true exteriorly, they left their nets, fishing boats and tax tables, interiorly they were still vying for attention according to the world's standards. In this part of Mark's Gospel we see the disciples arguing about who is the greatest.

What Jesus presents in response is a new way of understanding true greatness. Rather than it being based on competition and beating out others, true greatness comes from discovering what it means to belong to community and working together cooperatively.

Jesus talks about community, when in response to Peter's statement "that we have left everything", he says:

"Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, 30 who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands with persecutions and in the age to come eternal life."

We may have to choose to follow Jesus in such a way that family members might reject our faith and even us. Inheritances anticipated and worldly goods might need to be forfeited. However the gift for those open to this conversion will be the new family we will become members of because of our choice of following Jesus.

There is a moving verse in Romans 16 where in greeting the Christians who are in Rome, St. Paul writes:

13 Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord; and greet his mother—a mother to me also.

Who was Rufus? Mark tells us in the 15th chapter of his Gospel:

And they compelled a passer-by, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, the father of Rufus

Now think about this. Paul was writing his greeting to the Church in Rome. St. Mark was writing his Gospel to the same Christians in Rome. He refers to Rufus by name because he would have been known in the Roman Christian Community.

Now think back to the time of Jesus' crucifixion. Paul was vehemently opposed to Jesus, Simon was compelled to carry the Cross. Now some thirty years later Paul and Rufus are spiritual brothers and their mother has become like a mother to St. Paul.

When we discover these kind of spiritual familial relationships there is a true conversion that happens in our hearts. We realize that life is all about discovering in the present what it is to be part of this family, a family that will in heaven be described as participating in eternal life.

But here is the thing..... In heaven there will be no room for those vying to be the "Greatest". For as Jesus said in yesterday's Gospel, there is only one who is truly good and great, and that is God, the Father of this family that has Jesus as our big brother and Mary as our spiritual mother.

Those who see clearly where true greatness lies will face in the world different kinds of persecution because Jesus' kingdom and values are so antithetical to those of the world.

How much this would have been so in Nero's Rome. It was to Christians in the city of worldly greatness, who were the recipients of this Gospel. Rome, the City of Worldly greatness where Peter and Paul were martyred.

Rome, now the Mother Church of this world wide Catholic family. A family that we here at St. Peter's are called to cultivate on a parish level. Look around, here are your brothers and sisters. Here are those who together are learning to put into practice now the great reversal that will mark life in the forever family of God.