

Homily for February 4th 2017

Today's Gospel includes one of the most tender descriptions of Jesus' love. St. Mark tells that Jesus had compassion on the people because they were like sheep without a shepherd. This word compassion is one rich with meaning. It means to have "great love and empathy for the people". And while we will see later that Jesus will show concern for the peoples' physical hunger, he is even more concerned for their spiritual hunger and so Mark tells us:

"Jesus began to teach them many things"

The Gospels show is that Jesus is moved by hunger and sorrow, but what moves him most is ignorance. Ignorance of what? Ignorance of who we truly are. Ignorance of the wonderful truth that we have an immortal soul; a soul that Jesus says we can forfeit because of how we live in this world. That is why he says things like:

Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is easy, that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. 14 For the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find it are few. (Matthew 7:13-14)

For what does it profit a man, to gain the whole world and forfeit his life?

(Mark 8.36)

What most moves Jesus to compassion is the propensity we have as human beings to be ignorant of this fundamental biblical teaching. How we live each day is either drawing us closer to heaven and the "House of the Lord", or our life choices are resulting in our losing heaven's reward, bringing us to hell and damnation.

In our day we don't want to talk in these stark terms, but they are necessary because we are to be moved with the same compassion as Jesus had. Life really matters and how we live has eternal consequences.

This is why there is such a need for priests in the Church to understand that their primary work is "soul work". Today's reading from Hebrews puts it so clearly.

Obey your leaders and submit to them; for they are keeping watch over your souls, as men who will have to give account.

This is not some kind of cowering obedience but rather the obedience that results from seeing in us your priests the desire to submit to the Lord's ways. Back in chapter 2 of Hebrews, we read these words:

Therefore we must pay the closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away

Whenever there is a “therefore” in the biblical text, we need to ask the question, “What is it there for?” It is always used to apply something that has been said previously. What Hebrews 1 focuses on is the Incarnation. Because Jesus has come we have to pay even closer attention to God’s word than for those who lived before Jesus. Why is this? Because God has come in person, he has spoken to us in such a way that we can really understand the will of God because we now have heard God’s voice; a voice now recorded on the pages of the New Testament.

This is why Hebrews says that the people of God are to obey their leaders and submit to their teaching. For not only have we your priests been entrusted with representing Christ by the way we live, we have also been entrusted with the care of souls, a care that requires diligent and careful teaching of the fullness of God’s will for us.

As shepherds of souls, bishops and priests will one day have to give an account the Jesus for how we either helped or hindered people towards their ultimate destiny.

Notice what the letter says next:

Let them do this joyfully, and not sadly, for that would be of no advantage to you.

What an interesting verse. The work of the priesthood is joyful when people are truly hungering and thirsting for the Lord, when the flock entrusted to the shepherd’s care really wants to be fed the words of eternal life. Conversely when there is resistance to and rejection of the teaching of Jesus, then for the shepherd, there is a sadness, akin to a mother who has lovingly prepared a delicious meal that the family says, “no thanks, I would rather have chips and hotdogs.”

May we celebrate the gift of Jesus’ teaching ever more here at St. Peter’s and be a place where people can move from ignorance and darkness into the truth and light of the Gospel. For Jesus’ will is for us to know and do his will. The very theme that concludes this wonderful letter, in the words of this benediction:

Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, 21 equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in you that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.