

Homily for 5th Sunday of Ordinary TimeFebruary 8-9th 2020

Turning Beer into Furniture

The story is told of a man who had been a degenerate and a drunkard and was then brought to a place of conversion to Christ. His workmates used to try to shake his convictions and say: ‘Surely a sensible man like you cannot believe in the miracles that the Bible tells about. You cannot, for instance, believe that this Jesus of yours turned water into wine.’

‘Whether he turned water into wine or not,’ said the man, ‘I do not know; but in my own house I have seen him turn beer into furniture.’

This story shows us what happens when a person realizes my life is not my own but I am Christ’s. Our lives take on a meaning and a purpose that was previously unknown and a life marked by disorder and meaninglessness can become ordered and purposeful.

St. Paul the Apostle understood first hand the centrality of Jesus Christ in his own life. He was so focused on Christ that he declared to the Corinthians:

When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. ² For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified.¹

There was a simplicity to Paul’s message because it was unencumbered and free of lofty words. He was centred on declaring to people who Jesus was and the meaning of his death on the Cross. He understood that the Gospel message has the power to grab someone’s imagination and soul and so begin the supernatural work of conversion so that people can testify:

in my own house I have seen him turn beer into furniture.’

When, like in Paul’s life, Jesus is given permission to enter into the soul of a person then the Holy Spirit is given room to use such people. It then becomes evident that their lives are being influenced and governed by God. St Paul clearly experienced and knew that his ministry was inspired and shaped by the Holy Spirit and so he declares:

³ And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. ⁴ My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the

¹ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*](#). (1993). (1 Co 2:1–2). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

Spirit and of power,⁵ so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.²

Paul was saying in effect, I was unsure of how to go about this, and felt totally inadequate—and so nothing I said could have impressed you or anyone else. But the Message came through anyway. God’s Spirit and God’s power did it, which made it clear that your life of faith is a response to God’s power, not to some fancy mental or emotional footwork by me or anyone else.

Paul knew that the Gospel of Christ has a power unparalleled to any other power and influence in the world and this is why he spoke of coming to them in fear and trembling. This did not mean he was afraid of the Corinthians. Rather this language is characteristic of a Jewish person’s understanding of what it means to relate to God. He was so consciously aware of the presence of God that he had a holy fear and sense of awe because the Grace of Christ was so operative in his life.

Paul understood that to proclaim and live the gospel is only possible when the source of the Gospel – Jesus himself - is the very heart beat enlivening those who are his followers. When this happens, then Jesus Christ “and him crucified” is able to transform men and women so they can testify:

‘Whether he turned water into wine or not, I do not know; but in my own house I have seen him turn beer into furniture.’

It is very appropriate that this Epistle text is matched with today’s gospel reading. In the Gospel Jesus uses the analogies of salt and light to illustrate what it means to live our lives so they are a demonstration of the Spirit and the power of God.

I want you to listen again to these Gospel verses but in language that may enable you to hear them afresh:

“Let me tell you why you are here. You’re here to be salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavors of this earth. If you lose your saltiness, how will people taste godliness? You’ve lost your usefulness and will end up in the garbage.”

Here the Lord is saying something very important. Those who like Paul are aware of living in the presence of God with fear and trembling realize increasingly that we are to be like salt. What does salt do? In the ancient world it was used to keep things from going bad, and to hold putrefaction at bay. Plutarch, the Roman historian and philosopher, had a strange way of putting

² [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*](#). (1993). (1 Co 2:3–5). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

that. He said that meat is a dead body and part of a dead body, and will, if left to itself, go bad; but salt preserves it and keeps it fresh, and is therefore like a new soul inserted into a dead body.

I like this image because it helps us to capture that our vocation as Christians calls us to be the kind of people whose presence in the lives of others allows them to experience a new soul being inserted into a dead body. Spiritual Christ-centred life becomes present that was not there before. When this happens people can experience new life and declare:

‘Whether he turned water into wine or not, I do not know; but in my own house I have seen him turn beer into furniture.’

When we are displaying this salt-like character then not only do we have a work that helps to restore and preserve life but our presence helps to bring out the God-flavours of the earth. When this happens our presence is not to overwhelm others because too much salt ruins food. Rather we are to be subtly present so others discover more fully their true identity and purpose.

Coupled with the salt analogy is the analogy of the light.

“Here’s another way to put it: You’re here to be light, bringing out the God-colours in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We’re going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don’t think I’m going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I’m putting you on a light stand. Now that I’ve put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand—shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you’ll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven.”

There are two analogies Jesus is using here that incorporate light. The first is a collective metaphor. Followers of Christ are to be like a city on a hill. This speaks of how the Church universal is to be a presence in the world that is to stand out. We are to be markedly different from the world so that our life and witness is evident as being distinctive. How does this happen? This is where the second metaphor comes into play.

The houses in Palestine of Jesus’ day were very dark, with only one little circular window perhaps not more than eighteen inches across. The lamp was like a sauce-boat filled with oil with the wick floating in it. It was not so easy to rekindle a lamp in the days before matches existed. Normally the lamp stood on the lamp stand, which would be no more than a roughly shaped branch of wood; but when people went out, for safety’s sake, they took the lamp from its stand and put it under an earthen bushel measure, so that it might burn without risk until they came back. The primary duty of the light of the lamp was to be seen.

Jesus wants us to appreciate that our lives are to be like this. Lives that individually radiate the light of Christ, like a sauce-boat lamp can collectively be more the city set on a hill. Such lives in the words of Jesus will be marked by a kind of generosity that will in turn prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven so that they can say:

‘Whether he turned water into wine or not, I do not know; but in my own house I have seen him turn beer into furniture.’