

Homily for January 17, 2017

Today the Church remembers St. Anthony, the Egyptian Christian who is the true Father of Monasticism. He established communities of hermits in the Egyptian Desert in the 4th century. Remarkably he lived to be 104. He was born around 251 and died in 356. St Athanasius, a friend and fellow defender of the Faith, when the Church was becoming ever more heretical due to the teaching of a priest named Arius, said of Anthony:

His soul was free from blemish, for it was neither contracted as if by grief, nor relaxed by pleasure, nor possessed by laughter or dejection, for he was not troubled when he beheld the crowd, nor overjoyed at being saluted by so many.

Anthony had discovered what the writer to the Hebrews states in today's reading:

We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner shrine behind the curtain,

Here the writer to the Hebrews is sharing with us a secret to living a purposeful Christian life. We need an anchor in a world like this to keep us from drifting aimlessly. This was a problem in this community because back in chapter 2 he wrote:

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

How easy it is to drift away and become enamoured by the world and doubtful of God because of challenges and difficulties.

What is the anchor we need? It is our hope that in Jesus we have access to the inner sanctuary of God's presence. As Christians it is here in the Mass that this access is made daily available to us. In the Mass, as I have said before, heaven touches earth and we can draw close to the very throne room of God.

This image of the inner sanctuary was for the Jewish people the Holy of Holies, the heart of the Jerusalem Temple. The inner sanctuary could only be entered once a year on the Day of Atonement, by one person, The High Priest. Now says the writer we all have access to the inner shrine behind the curtain because of Jesus' death.

In Matthew 26: 51 we are told that at the moment of Jesus' death:

And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.

It was this curtain that separated the rest of the Temple from the inner sanctuary. Now this division is no longer there because God has torn the curtain. If this was a work done by people

it would have been torn from bottom to top. But because God is the one who initiated this action it is torn from top to bottom.

Jesus has entered not into the Holy of Holies in Jerusalem but heaven itself. For this writer, this changes everything for us. Jesus is the High Priest whose action fulfills the promise God made to Abraham. And where did he make the promise to Abraham quoted in Hebrews?

“Surely I will bless you and multiply you.”

It was at Mount Moriah where Abraham was prepared to sacrifice Isaac. And why is Mount Moriah so important? We read this in 2 Chronicles 3.1:

Then Solomon began to build the house of the LORD in Jerusalem on Mount Moriah,

Moriah, the place where Abraham’s only son was to be sacrificed; Moriah the place where the Temple in Jerusalem was established. That Temple where for 1000, with the exception of the period of the Exile, in the 6th century BC, sacrifices were made. Now with Jesus sacrificial death the Temple is no longer needed because he fulfills what was foreshadowed all those centuries earlier. He is the only Son who is sacrificed for the Sin.

Hebrews brings together in these few verses the most condense re-telling of the Story of Salvation found in the whole New Testament, affirming that in Jesus, God is true to he promises that go all the way back to Abraham.

For those who come to believe in this story and know the hope that is ours because of Jesus this has a very practical implication described at the beginning of the passage:

10 For God is not so unjust as to overlook your work and the love which you showed for his sake in serving the saints, as you still do. 11 And we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness in realizing the full assurance of hope until the end, 12 so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.

Because Jesus has entered the Sanctuary we can live intentionally by loving the saints and patiently awaiting to inherit the promise of heaven.

This is what St. Anthony did. He lived a very long life that did not fluctuate between extremes of commitment and doubt, like a boat tossed about on a stormy sea. His was an anchored life where his soul was established in Jesus. May we in this Mass see it as the anchor that can ground our souls too thus keeping us from drifting away from Jesus and the Church.