

Homily for January 4, 2017

In John Chapter 8 Jesus nails our human predicament which in turn explains why he needed to be nailed to the Cross.

“Truly, truly, I say to you, every one who commits sin is a slave to sin. 35 The slave does not continue in the house for ever; the son continues for ever. 36 So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.”

The Bible teaches that you and I are powerless to break free from the devil and the bondage of our own weaknesses because of sin. This predicament entangles everyone. St. Paul in Romans 3.9 states it like this:

What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all; for I have already charged that all men, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin

Referring to “Jews and Gentiles” is Paul’s way of saying everyone is in the same boat. Christ alone can liberate slaves of the devil and make them sons and daughters of the Father.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church picking up on this theme notes:

By freeing some individuals from the earthly evils of hunger, injustice, illness, and death, Jesus performed messianic signs. Nevertheless he did not come to abolish all evils here below, but to free people from the gravest slavery, sin, which thwarts them in their vocation as God’s sons and daughters and causes all forms of human bondage. (549)¹

It is this theme that St. John in today’s epistle is emphasizing. Notice how he begins:

Little children, let no one deceive you

Repeatedly in this epistle John address his readers as little children. This is instructive, reminding us that just as children need the protective care of their parents we need the protective care of our heavenly Father, big brother Jesus and Mother Mary. One of the things that we need to be most protected from is the deception that is in the world, which is under the domain of the devil.

Constantly the world wants to celebrate vice and sin and diminish or even reject outright our need for Jesus Christ. John wants us to be aware that this is the greatest deception faced by every generation of believers. He then lays out in very clear terms the tension at play in the soul of every human being:

He who does right is righteous, as he is righteous. 8 He who commits sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil.

Here is the human predicament expressed with precision and the explanation as to why Jesus had to be nailed to the Cross. The devil keeps people in the vice of sin, whereby they turn away from God and come under the power of the evil one. Such people are slaves. Contrast that with what

¹ Catholic Church. (2000). Catechism of the Catholic Church (2nd Ed., p. 140). Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference.

John says about those who come under the saving Lordship of Jesus Christ. They become sons and daughters of God our Father. So great is the distinction that John uses language that can lead us to think, that to be a follower of Jesus means to be sinless.

9 Any one born of God does not commit sin; for God's seed abides in him, and he cannot sin because he is born of God. 10 By this it may be seen who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not do right is not of God, nor he who does not love his brother.

The point is not that sinless perfection is required to call oneself a Christian, but that true believers refuse to lead lives dominated by sin. Instead, they strive to break free from godless habits, and, whenever necessary, they seek God's mercy through confession, a theme John had written about at the end of chapter 1 and beginning of chapter 2:

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.... My little children, I am writing this to you so that you may not sin; but if any one does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous

This focus on the moral life leads John into a discussion about family likeness: the children of the devil act like the devil, while the children of God imitate the love of God. Even now we are the children of God because we possess the firstfruits of the Spirit. However, since we are not yet fully saved or renewed, we are also children of the world. This explains why we are still able to sin. Insofar as we are children of God by the regenerating Spirit, we cannot commit sin; and yet, if we say that we have no sin, we are only deceiving ourselves because we are still influenced by the world.

Tomorrow John will help us to understand how we can cultivate a way of life that evermore frees us from sin so we can grow in righteousness.