

Homily for July 29th 2018
17th Sunday of Ordinary Time

Divide and Convert

Our reading from the Gospel ends with St John telling us how the people fed by Jesus wanted to make him a king, by force. That is, they wanted to compel him to be the kind of leader who would use his authority in the ways ancient kings, and many modern kings rule. To divide and conquer. History is filled with countless examples of such kings. Their intention is to dominate, not only those foreign lands they have defeated but their own subjects as well. There is a predilection common to humans where we want to be ruled in such a way that the leader thinks and acts on behalf of the people, thus leading the people to abdicate responsibility for their lives or to choose to live vicariously through the one who is king.

There is an interesting contrast that we read of in the Gospels between two men. St James, whose feast day we celebrated last Wednesday, and King Herod. James, and his brother John were nicknamed by Jesus “The Sons of Thunder”. As young men they were looking for a leader, a ruler, who would exercise a kind of kingly power as is so often understood – The divide and conquer style of leadership. At one time St Luke tells us that the people of Samaria would not receive Jesus’ message – because Luke says Jesus had his face set for Jerusalem and the Cross. James and John however had not yet understood the way of Jesus and so they ask if lightening should be called down on those Samaritan ingrates. “We will show them a thing or two about who is king.” But Jesus made it clear that his interests are never served by violence and bitter domination.

During the intervening fourteen years – from the Samaritan fire and brimstone sermon to his death in 44 AD - something had happened to James. He was no longer a son of thunder, but a son of compassion. Clement of Alexandria (b. 150- d. 215) relates how when James was taken before the tribunal his integrity was so apparent that his accuser approached him afterwards to ask his pardon. As James was led to the place of execution he said to this man: “Peace be with you” and hugged him. The two of them together received the crown of martyrdom.¹ This man saw in James something that he did not see in the man who was the temporal king, Herod. By this time Herod had become so bent on power that he received the accolades of the people who declared he was a god and not a man. St Luke tells us that just as he was basking in the peoples’ praise an angel struck him dead. What a difference. James at his death was filled with the character of the true God and humility. Herod was consumed by himself and pride.

Like so many who have come after him, Herod’s lust for absolute power – destroyed him absolutely. James, on the other hand learned of another King, Jesus, who rather than choosing the strategy of divide and conquer, chose, and continues to choose the strategy of divide and convert.

¹ cf Clement of Alexandria, Hypotyposes, VII, quoted by Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History, 11,9 Fernandez, Francis (2011-11-26). In Conversation with God – Volume 7 Part 1 Feasts July - September (Kindle Locations 4962-4963). Scepter (UK) Ltd. Kindle Edition.

What do I mean by this? In our Gospel for today we hear how Jesus divided the light meal of the boy who showed up in the Galilean hills with five small loaves and two fish. Jesus took this meagre fare, divided it among those assembled and the effects of that meal have been experienced ever since, the conversion of millions upon millions of people.

How does this method of divide and convert work? John tells us it involves teaching, taking, thanking and telling.

At the beginning of John 6 Jesus goes up on the mountainside in order to teach his disciples. This would have included, not only the twelve but other who would be attracted to his teaching. As Jesus teaches, he shows us the way of the true and eternal kingdom, the kingdom of God. This is a kingdom where slowly those who sit at the master's feet are changed from holding worldly values that are fleeting to those values that have eternal effect. This is exactly what we see with the Twelve and all of those who have entrusted themselves to the master teacher. We come to discover that the fundamental value that not only makes sense of life but also directs our lives towards the grave shapes the kind of unity St. Paul wrote of in today's epistle when he states:

⁴ There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, ⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶ one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all.

Seven times in three verses St Paul uses the adjective one. St Paul declares that the true king, Jesus, brings together under his holy and gracious rule all people. God out of his love for us is always showing us the way to true unity - even in spite of ourselves. The divide and conquer way to which we are all so prone tears apart. But the divide and conversion way of Jesus leads to a kind of unity so clearly represented by the people gathered together sharing the meal of that one loaf. Of this unity Vatican II declares:

God gathered together as one all those who in faith look upon Jesus as the author of salvation and the source of unity and peace, and established them as the Church that for each and all it may be the visible sacrament of this saving unity.¹

This brings me to what Jesus does next. He takes those five barley loaves and two fish and is able to multiply what is given so that many are graced and supplied by the small offering of this boy. Barley loaves were the food of the poor. This is important. Kings so often orchestrate their strategies from a position of strength. Jesus so often initiates his strategy from a position of weakness. This is because he does not want to dominate us but rather wants to work through us. This means he wants us to become people who understand life is most meaningful when lived in concert with Jesus. However to live cooperatively with Jesus also involves times when we are stretched and tested as were the apostles. Such testing is an invitation for us to realize Jesus call to dependence. Not only are we to be dependent upon him but Jesus also chooses to make himself dependent upon us - like when using the meal of a loaf.

When Jesus discovers such cooperation and dependence he is thankful. How different this is from so many earthly rulers whose desire for power is insatiable and therefore never satisfied.

Thanksgiving on the other hand is a way to express satisfaction for the gift given. When we follow the way of Jesus we too discover that true meaning is known by those who are learning the way of thanksgiving.

These turn leads to the fourth t, telling. We are learning to live attentive to the signs of grace and opportunities we have to serve with Jesus in his mission of divide and convert by telling others about our servant king.

Teaching, taking, thanking and telling finds its focus here in the Mass where everything that is a component of our lives is important and gathered together so that no fragments are lost.

The fragments, gathered into the twelve baskets represent the care Jesus wants us to take in how we live our daily lives. As we discover that we cannot make him king by force but rather he is to be our king by choice we are then open to the transformative work of conversion. We are not setting our own agenda, setting up our own little kingdoms. Rather we are joining with Jesus in ushering in his kingdom where we choose to:

lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ² with all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love, ³ eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

It was this kind of integrity that had so come to mark the life of St. James, so that at his death he witnessed to Jesus' Kingship so convincingly that another, his accuser, chose to die for this king, rather than live for King Herod and the kingdom of this world.

We can never force Jesus to be king but he does ask us to choose him to be our king so that at every Mass we reaffirm that this is a meal of divide and conversion and not divide and conquer.