

***Righteous Relativism***

***Homily for July 30, 2017***

Last weekend I was privileged to visit the Sainte-Chapelle in central Paris. The two-level building, which was built in just seven years in the 1240s, is a small but spectacular example of Gothic architecture. The upper chapel has little stone work. What stands out are the 15 huge stained glass panels and a rose window added a century later. In all there is 6,458 square feet of stained glass windows that illustrate biblical scenes from both testaments. Primarily deep red and blue, they depict 1,130 biblical figures.

The devout Louis IX spent 40,000 livres building the chapel to house the Crown of Thorns that the Roman Soldiers wove and placed on Jesus' head in mockery as they hailed him: "King of the Jews".

The Crown was almost three and a half times more expensive than the chapel, costing St. Louis IX 135,000 livres. He bought it from the Emperor of Constantinople.

There is much that is inspiring about Sainte-Chapelle. What for me was most moving, as I have reflected on my visit, is that here is a building of such radiant majesty created to house the relic that adorned the head of the saviour. This chapel is a clear expression that everything in this world is to be in service of the highest good, the Kingdom of God, represented by the Crown of Thorns. Sainte-Chapelle is remarkable because it shows us what it means to choose the highest good. Beauty used to adorn him who was more beautiful still, King Jesus and His Crown.

One of the gifts of our Catholic Tradition is that importance we attach to beauty. We can use the gems of this world, coloured glass in the case of St. Chapelle, as a way to express values that transcend this world.

This is the theme at the heart of today's readings. We are called to be, like Louis IX, righteous relativists. By this I mean that everything we value in this world is to be evaluated in relation to the Kingdom of Heaven and has relative value in relation to the Kingdom of Heaven.

Let's see how our readings inspire us to such righteous relativism.

In the Psalm we hear the words of another King, David, who like Louis IX, understood that every good in this world is to serve that which transcends the world. Listen to David's understanding of relative value as he uses that language of comparison:

***The law of your mouth is better to me  
than thousands of gold and silver pieces.***

***Truly I love your commandments  
more than gold, more than fine gold.***

David does not disdain silver and gold but says they have lesser value to the law and commands of God. David is a righteous relativist. Material wealth is a lesser good when seen in relation to

the highest good, the commandments of God. How does David's perspective on what is most valuable influence how he lives?

*Let your steadfast love become my comfort  
according to your promise to your servant.*

**77** *Let your mercy come to me, that I may live;  
for your law is my delight.*

Because he places God's law as his ultimate good, David desires to know more deeply the steadfast love and mercy of God. These attributes of God imparted to David are what give his life true meaning and so our psalm excerpt for today concludes with David declaring:

*Your decrees are wonderful;  
therefore my soul keeps them.*

*The unfolding of your words gives light;  
it imparts understanding to the simple.*

The unfolding of God's word is for David that light by which he lives. Just as Sainte-Chapelle's beauty would be hidden without the sun's light, the true beauty of life is hidden from us without the light of God's decrees and words.

This expression of righteous relativism was something David's son, Solomon also requested. We heard from 1 Kings his prayer to God. When God asks him what his heart most desired, Solomon answered:

*Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern  
between good and evil*

Like David his father, what Solomon desired was wisdom, whereby he could discern between good and evil because he wanted to more fully understand the mind and will of God. He understood that he was to adhere to a word that was known to come from a place farther on and higher up than him. Solomon knew that in order to live well in this world he had to place as his highest good the word that comes from the higher world. How does God respond to Solomon's request?

*It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this. 11 God said to him, "Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches, or for the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, 12 I now do according to your word. Indeed I give you a wise and discerning mind; no one like you has been before you and no one like you shall arise after you*

Are long life and riches wrong? No, not if they are in the service of the highest good. To understand what is right, to live in this world with a wise and discerning mind is what is most important.

Why is this so important? Let me invite one of the Church's godly Cardinals, Robert Sarah, who in his book *God or Nothing* observes:

***On earth, we would like to love with all our heart, but we do not succeed. Why? Because we do not see God. In heaven, our souls will be silent, perfectly docile, and transparent to the light. The soul will be immobile. Man's perpetual restlessness on earth leads him to pursue fleeting appearances. In heaven we will possess being.***<sup>1</sup>

Cardinal Sarah seems to be suggesting that in heaven we will be like the windows of St. Chapelle, reflecting in multifaceted splendor the light of God. In this world we are so caught up by that which is passing away that without an intentional willingness to pray like David and Solomon we will be distracted and our lives opaque to God's light. We will be perpetually restless. God wants us to anticipate now what we will know fully in heaven, a serenity of soul that is the fruit of putting the Kingdom of Heaven first.

Some people come to a realization of the kingdom's importance almost accidentally, like a person who in discovering a hidden treasure sells everything in order to buy the field so as to have the treasure. Others have searched diligently over time and have perhaps explored many different religious and philosophical ideas before finding in Catholicism the Pearl of Great Price. When we come to the place where either accidentally or after much searching we discover that which is most important we will with David declare:

***The law of your mouth is better to me  
than thousands of gold and silver pieces.***

With Solomon we will pray:

***Give your servant therefore an understanding mind able to discern between good and evil***

When people come to a deeper understanding of the relative value of everything in this world when compared with God's Kingdom then with St. Paul we will more discern and confidently exclaim:

***We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. 29 For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son.***

Everything in this world, says Paul, is to be used in order for God to conform us to the image of Jesus. Think again of what this means in relation to Sainte-Chapelle. What had been originally created to represent mockery and disdain, the Crown of Thorns, becomes the very relic that inspires the beauty that is Sainte-Chapelle. That which had a malicious and evil intent becomes

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<sup>1</sup> Sarah, Cardinal Robert; Diat, Nicolas. *God or Nothing* (p. 211). Ignatius Press. Kindle Edition.

the inspiration for a building are benevolent glory. Remarkably, says the Apostle Paul, we will one day have a beauty that will surpass that which is most beautiful in this world. Our destiny has been revealed to us by God. When we know this to be true with St. Theresa of Avila we will confidently affirm her famous words:

***“Let nothing trouble you, let nothing scare you, all is fleeting, God alone is unchanging. Patience everything obtains. Who possesses God nothing wants. God alone suffices.”***

Such is the perspective of righteous relativists like, David, Solomon, St. Paul, Louis IX, St. Theresa, Cardinal Sarah and Jesus. May their perspective help us to live purposefully in the present as we put the one whose Crown is most glorious first in our lives.