

*Displacing the Vinegar with Honey*

Homily for November 20, 2020

Pope Benedict's encyclical on hope, *Spe Salvi*, contains this thoughtful passage that ties into the theme of our readings today. The Pope Emeritus writes:

“Saint Augustine, in a homily on the First Letter of John, describes very beautifully the intimate relationship between prayer and hope. He defines prayer as an exercise of desire. Man was created for greatness—for God himself; he was created to be filled by God. But his heart is too small for the greatness to which it is destined. It must be stretched. “By delaying [his gift], God strengthens our desire; through desire he enlarges our soul and by expanding it he increases its capacity [for receiving him]”.

Benedict goes on to write:

Augustine then uses a very beautiful image to describe this process of enlargement and preparation of the human heart. “Suppose that God wishes to fill you with honey [a symbol of God's tenderness and goodness]; but if you are full of vinegar, where will you put the honey?” The vessel, that is your heart, must first be enlarged and then cleansed, freed from the vinegar and its taste. This requires hard work and is painful, but in this way alone do we become suited to that for which we are destined”.

“Even if Augustine speaks directly only of our capacity for God, it is nevertheless clear that through this effort by which we are freed from vinegar and the taste of vinegar, not only are we made free for God, but we also become open to others. It is only by becoming children of God, that we can be with our common Father. To pray is not to step outside history and withdraw to our own private corner of happiness. When we pray properly we undergo a process of inner purification which opens us up to God and thus to our fellow human beings as well.”

It is this same theme that is on display in our readings today. St. John takes the scroll of God's word, sweet to the taste but bitter in the stomach. Jesus goes into the Temple, the place set aside for prayer and over turns the tables of the money changers because the people selling and buying had turned it into a robbers den.

Jesus does the same thing in our lives as we become increasingly devoted to him. On the one hand, his word tastes so sweet – but then I look into my heart and how aware I am of the vinegar is disquiet, dissatisfaction, ingratitude, and judgment towards others. I need to have Jesus come and overturn all that makes me less than I am called to be. With the psalmist I want to learn to pray:

***The law of your mouth is better to me than thousands of gold and silver pieces. How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth! Your decrees are my heritage forever; they are the joy of my heart. With open mouth I pant, because I long for your commandments.***

How I need this kind of conversion and so do you. May we ask for the grace to displace the bitter vinegar with the honey of Psalm 119 and discover the greatness for which God created us – to be Temples of Prayer that radiate His love.