

Homily for Thursday, January 16 – “Persistence or Presumption”

As I was studying the texts for today’s Mass, there are 2 words that came to mind. Are we going to live as persistent disciples or presumptuous disciples? Will we be persistent or presumptuous disciples and let me explain what I mean by looking at the Gospel.

The Gospel begins with this man with leprosy which of course for the Jewish people was a terrible disease that excluded that person from the community. And as he sees Jesus coming, he is persistent in his prayer and he asks the Lord, “Lord, if you are willing, cleanse me.” And the beautiful answer our Lord gives, “I do choose to cleanse you. Be made clean.” So at the beginning this man is persistent in his prayer but then something very interesting happens. Jesus gives him a very clear direction. He says to him ‘don’t tell anyone about what has just happened but rather go and show yourself to the priest.’

Now, I thought, let’s see what that means and I turned to Leviticus, Chapter 14 and the prescription as to what a man who has been cleansed from leprosy is to do, takes up 24 verses. I’m not going to explain the whole thing to you but let explain a part of what a man is to do who is cured of leprosy. He would go the priest and the priest would take him outside of the camp and first, inspect him and if, indeed, the priest declares ‘yes you are clean’, two birds would be taken. One would be killed, the other would be still alive and from the dead bird, blood would be put on the bird that’s still alive and 7 times the man who had been cured from leprosy would be sprinkled and that was just the beginning.

But here’s the point. Jesus had a clear direction to give to this man but the man presumed, ‘I’ve been healed now. I can go my way and do what I want to.’ And how easy that can be for us to do as well. That Jesus has touched our lives but then we presume, ‘well, I can do it my own way’.

But the beautiful thing about our Lord is that he says, ‘No’, that he has revealed his will, he has revealed his law. And the thing that results from this man’s presumption is that Jesus’ ministry is affected in a negative way, because word was spreading as to what had happened to this man cured of leprosy, people were coming to Jesus from every direction. And his opportunity to teach and to

understand with people what it means to say that he truly is the Messiah, was in some ways, compromised.

Now, keep this in mind for a minute and let's look back at that very difficult reading from the Old Testament. What in the world was that about? It's about the people of Israel presuming upon God. They thought, 'Well, if we bring the Ark of the Covenant into battle against the Philistines, we've got God in our back pocket.' Because of course, for the Jewish people, the Ark was the closest representation to God's presence. But they were presuming upon God's goodness and his love. You see, the 2 priests who are mentioned, the sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, they were terrible men who were godless and did not care about what it meant to follow in the ways of God. You can read their story in Samuel 2, 3 and 4.

And what our texts are wanting to show us is something that is integral to our Catholic identity, that we don't just live the faith any way that we want to. The Lord has left us particular practices, particular sacraments, particular ways of relating that allow us to be persistent in our Catholic faith.

And aren't we thankful that I don't have to sprinkle you 7 times with the blood of a dead bird? No, we come to the blood of the Lamb that was poured out for us on the cross so that we can be men and women that are growing and living our lives of a deepening relationship with Jesus Christ. And we will never want to presume on his mercy but always be men and women who are persistent in our Catholic faith.

Jesus, help us this day, to be like that and to trust you, to love you and to live for you with both persistent and active joy. Amen