

Commentary on the Gospel for Thu, Oct 3rd 2013

St. Francis Borgia, the third general of the Society of Jesus, and a personal friend of St. Ignatius, was one of the wealthiest and most influential men of the late 16th Century. He was a virtuous member of a Renaissance family famous for lack of virtue. He was related by marriage or blood to most of the crowns of Europe and was a member of the royal court of Spain during a period when Spain was the pre-eminent economic power of the time. But none of that worldly success and fame accounts for his canonization by the Catholic Church. Rather it was his determination to abandon all the power and wealth after his wife's death and enter the Jesuits. Ignatius convinced him that he had obligations to his ten children (most of whom were still very young) and to the Spanish king that he needed to fulfill before he sought the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. He obviously succeeded in both meeting those obligations and joining the Society, where, to his chagrin, he was given great responsibility and concomitant authority. But it is his humility and generosity that the Church invites us to consider – his desire to serve as intimate companion of Jesus – that is set before us on this day before the more famous Saint Francis (of Assisi) is honored by the Church.

Today's Gospel challenges us to realize that like Francis Borgia we are called to put our trust in God and abandon the security of the world if we want to be effective disciples. Furthermore, the Gospel warns, there will be times and places when we are not successful in winning others to Christ even when we are truly faithful. There are whole populations that may not be able to hear the good news – even when we practice it as well as preach it. We are counseled to cut our losses and look for other places and people to serve. This is a shocking message from one such as Jesus who knows that the Father wants everyone to hear the good news of God's love. But Jesus met such opposition, and since he did, it is virtually certain that we will as well.

But it was the first reading from the ordinary lectionary that invited me to deepest reflection, however. I had to spend some time praying about this account of the men, women and children of the Israelites who returned from exile in Babylon to a defeated and destroyed Israel and re-established a social system that worked. Today's text is about their re-embrace of God's law in a very emotional setting.

For us, in these United States, and perhaps in most of world culture influenced by the Enlightenment, we have a cultural aversion to law unless we establish it ourselves. We are so deeply committed to the absolute rights of the individual that the picture this reading presents is utterly "mind blowing". These people are listening all day long, and then sobbing in joy and celebrating with dancing and feasting the reception of a pattern of directives that challenged them in virtually every area of their personal and social relationships to address first and foremost the "common good." One can presume that Ezra is emphasizing God's mercy in granting these teachings about Divine desire for God's people, but this is hard for us to even begin to imagine I think.

But a series of questions came to my mind: Is it better to know if a decision I am making will bring happiness or grief? Does it make life easier and more joyful if we know clearly what things will kill us and what will make us healthier? Would I really rather know what something costs before I make a commitment to purchase it? If I answer yes to any of these, but then think about them I realize that many times I really don't want to know because that will cause me to have to make the better choice for myself and possibly others – but I may not want the “better choice” – I may want what I want . . . at whatever cost. Simply put, that is sin. God has given us the capacity to know in many circumstances the better choice – this is the essence of “the law” – not so much a law as a teaching about human flourishing. But sin does have a way of making it seem that my way is still better – as St. Paul pointed out in his letter to the Romans. None the less, the Scriptures today remind us that if we let God be God - and take it for granted that God's desire is GOOD for us and for all around us, we really do have a way of living that is healthier, that brings happiness and flourishing, and that makes the community around us much more peaceful and protective.

On such reflection it does make sense to have a celebration about this good news! I think Francis Borgia must have discovered this – and it would be a good thing for us if we did also! “The precepts of the Lord give joy to the heart.”

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