

Commentary on the Gospel for Sat, Nov 9th 2013

Today's liturgical celebration, which is a major feast day of the Church, provides a meditation itself even before we consider the readings and their wonderful images. What does it mean to celebrate this specific place?

The month of November, falling nearly at the end of the calendar year and encompassing the heart of the Autumn season in the northern hemisphere, presents all Christians with an opportunity to think of the "last things," that is, death and the promise of unending future in the heart of the fullness of God's Kingdom – or forever rejected from the opportunity of living in that fullness. The harvest of the material world – visibly happening on the farms that surround us here in Nebraska, USA – is a profound symbol of God's harvest of all human life. The feasts of All Saints, All Souls and the Blessed of the Society of Jesus, we have recently celebrated, all remind us of the fact that we will join our brothers and sisters in eternal life before much more time elapses.

The tradition of Christian lectionaries going back to the 3rd and 4th Centuries show that November and December have been times for pondering the goal of our life here on earth - the New Creation that was inaugurated by Christ and is coming to fullness for all the created order. The dedication of St. John Lateran, early in this eschatological period, focuses on the Cathedral of the Diocese of Rome, The Pope's seat or Cathedra which serves as a "sacrament" of the unity of the whole Church in the Body of Christ, and the promise of our participation in those eschatological realities of fullness. The feast also challenges us, through our Baptism to be responsive to our spiritual capacity for enriching the world with faith in the good news of God's saving deeds – to bring forth that harvest of God's Reign.

So the feast itself – which is not about a building but about the universal community of faith that worships there – presents texts from the vision of the prophet Ezechial about the living river flowing from the altar of the Temple – obviously applied to the Altar and Baptistery of St. John Lateran – and the altar of each Christian heart. The waters flow east (toward the dawn of the new creation) and bring new life to everything they touch. Food and medicine – those elements of nature that nurture and heal are signs of God's reign. In God's Kingdom there will be no hunger and no illness of death. It belongs to the Church to realize this promise – even imperfectly – wherever the Church exists (wherever the waters flow). That means that those of us who are baptized are meant to bring the nurture and health care of Christ to those who need to be fed and healed. As I prayed with this text I was reminded sharply of Pope Francis' "field hospital" image in his recent interview and homilies.

We are the material of this living water – this river of hope in our starving and wounded world – or at least we are meant to be if we take the grace of baptism – the very life of Christ in us – seriously.

The Pauline passage from 1 Corinthians challenges us with the symbol of the building itself. We are the stones that are held together by the Spirit into the building of Christ that "houses" the world. Do we stand firmly in our unity with other Christians, or do we protect cracks in our walls where the Spirit

is no longer given room, so that some form of dry rot invades our hearts meant to be the stones of the Temple of God's glory?

Finally, the Gospel presents the image of Jesus driving that rot, in the form of greed and self-interest, out of the Temple meant to source the waters of life for all creation. Again the image of ourselves as the living Temple – the location in time and place of God's material presence by our presence – smacks us in the face as we pray about the importance of our commitment to the relationship of identity with Christ born into us in our Baptism.

When I suggest to my students in a course in Sacraments that we are not just sitting around and waiting for the end times – that we are engaged in the work of bringing about the Reign of God into this created order – by being the river, the stone and the temple itself – they are completely astounded that this is the self-awareness of the Church. We, I am in Christ right now. WE are filled with Christ's Spirit and called to nurture and heal all of the created order in Christ's name and through the Spirit of Christ given to us. Where have I dried up? Where is the rot of my selfishness destroying the temple and eating away at the other stones? Where is the world failing to know of the promise of the end times because we fail to be living members of Christ witnessing right now to the New Creation? These thoughts are uncomfortable as I watch the combine in the fields near home bringing in the harvest . . . but they are the invitation and the challenge of Jesus to me as a member of His Body. I have chosen and consecrated this house, says the Lord, that my name may be there forever. (Gospel acclamation from 2 Chronicles 7.16)

Eileen Burke-Sullivan