

Commentary on the Gospel for Mon, Feb 3rd 2014

Today's liturgy is simply that of Monday in the Fourth Week of Ordinary Time, but the Church also honors St. Blaise with an optional memorial. An early Fourth Century Bishop of Armenia, Blaise was martyred even after the Edict of Toleration. He was little known or appreciated in the Latin Church until a hagiographical account of his life, The Acts of Blaise, was written and fairly widely circulated in the early medieval period four hundred years later. Replete with stories of compassion for the poor and suffering, respectful attention from wild animals (wolves, bears and lions), the curing of ailments, including a child suffering from a bone caught in his throat, and horrifying accounts of final suffering and death when he did not abandon his faith and worship pagan gods, the Acts were guaranteed to evoke reverence and widespread devotion among Christians longing to know that men and women were genuinely free through God's grace to live the Gospel message faithfully. Popular devotion canonized Blaise and on his feast (today) numerous practices of devotion have been carried out in different parts of the world, including the blessing of throats so popular in the United States. This evocation of God's care through the intercession of one of his champions makes particular human sense in the midst of the cold and flu season filled with sore throats.

The readings today provide an interesting counter point to the blessing of throats devotion, however. The first reading is taken from the semi-continuous reading of First and Second Samuel that we have been praying with since the beginning of Ordinary Time. If we have attended each day to the readings we have been instructed by the triumphs and tragedies of the early monarchs in Israel, King Saul and, now, King David. David's son, Absalom has betrayed his father and started a war of succession. A broken-hearted David processes through the streets of Jerusalem publically grieving when he encounters a relative of the former King, Saul who David had unseated. The relative runs beside the procession, throwing stones and dirt upon the King and his attendants and yelling insults and calling down curses. David's servants want to do harm to the crazed man, but David recognizes the other man's suffering out of the depths of his own. He also realizes that only God can judge whether this man is righteous in his anger, so he bears patiently with this additional sorrow. One can see in David a "type" of Jesus (his descendent) who will carry the sins of the nation and all of humanity to the cross as all the people around him mock him and jeer at his suffering.

In the Gospel we encounter another man who is mentally deranged, howling and throwing stones. But he is trying to destroy himself. He and the evil voices within him recognize in Jesus the power of life over death and order in chaos – the power of the Creator. As voices of chaos and destroyers of human peace and goodness, these demons beg Jesus not to drive them out to wander aimlessly (this would be exceedingly dangerous to everyone in that neighborhood) - but rather ask him to send them into a nearby herd of pigs. There is much going on in this text that we could spend days pondering, but those who know Jewish law and custom know that pigs are abhorrent to the Jews and their meat is utterly unclean. Only unbelievers would make a profit from trading in pigs. Apparently these pigs are an important element of the local economy, however, and so when Jesus sends the demons into the pigs, causing the animals to self-destruct (they stampede off a cliff) the whole population comes out of town and begs Jesus to leave – lest he do more "damage". They don't ask him to save them but to go away

– to leave them to their darkness. Only the formerly crazed man, who is healed of his self-destroying demons, recognizes Jesus for who he is, and begs to follow him. Jesus sends him back to his own family and friends to proclaim the good news of his salvation.

On this Monday in February we are given a day to prayerfully consider what healing or forgiveness we need for ourselves, our families, our community. Perhaps we need our throats blessed so they can be opened to the praising of God's mercy rather than cursing (or just grumbling about) our world, our leaders, ourselves. Perhaps there are some destructive tendencies in our hearts that make us want to get revenge for wounds we have suffered from others, or perhaps there are voices in our heads that convince us to engage in behavior that seriously harms our own lives – perhaps overwork, or attraction to the wrong kinds of entertainment or the wrong use of time and talent. Whatever attracts us too much and keeps us from the freedom of following Jesus completely.

From whatever we need healing, forgiveness, peace, or consolation Jesus walks by morning, noon and night to touch us, to relieve our hearts of darkness, to comfort us – to take onto himself the consequences of our sin, so that we no longer need to carry those burdens or follow those destructive commands. This is a day for telling our families and friends the good news that Jesus has liberated us.

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