

Commentary on the Gospel for Sat, Sep 20th 2014

Memorial of Saint Andrew Kim Tae-g?n, Priest, and Paul Ch?ng Ha-sang, and Companions, Martyrs
As is often the case, the readings selected for today from the daily lectionary assigned to this Saturday of the 24th week in Ordinary Time, strikingly illuminate the faith of the saints memorialized today from Korea. Pope John Paul II canonized 103 Korean martyrs, the majority of whom were lay women and men. These 19th Century ordinary people were arrested and killed for ostensibly consorting with foreigners at a time when all of Korea was utterly insular. In fact they died for holding a faith that was not a brand of Confucianism, the local religion, which ironically had been “foreign” in its origins in Korea centuries before. But as Andrew Kim, one of the few priests of the group of martyrs wrote in in his final letter to the Christian Community “It is for Him [God] that I die.” What is often remarked upon about the Korean Church is that it spread almost entirely through the agency of lay men and women who heard about the Christian Faith and were attracted to the Christ-life by the Jesuits in China while the Koreans were on a diplomatic mission. These lay men and women returned home and sowed the Faith among their families. When international missionaries arrived decades later they found over 10,000 Christians who had never been served by priests. A similar phenomenon was discovered in Japan where the faith was handed down through families for several centuries among the laity after all priests were driven out or killed. The Faith of the martyrs, nourished in family life, became the foundation of the Church that Pope Francis recently visited in Korea. How did these women and men have the courage to suffer and die as they did? How was it that they held on to the Christian Faith even when it was scorned as foreign and inferior by their political and social leaders?

When we consider such wondrous acts of the Spirit it is, perhaps, no mystery that Pope Francis is urgently determined to discover again how to strengthen and nurture family life as the domestic Church that is the seed bed of faith for future generations.

The image of seeds points to both Scripture texts assigned to today’s liturgy. In the letter to the Corinthians, Paul is challenging his community of new Christians to understand that the Body that is raised after death is characterized by its relationship with Christ – in fact it is the Christ Life in us, which is grafted into our human life and remains fully alive through the dying process. To the extent that we have aligned our life to the Christ life within us we are fully Christified – and made capable of eternal life – which belongs by nature only to God. The Christ Life is “sowed” (or conceived) in us by the proclamation of the Word and brought to birth in Baptism.

Matthew’s Gospel points out that the receptive soil is fruitful soil. That which is planted is “the Word of God” – another way of describing the Christ Life in us. But our human life is the ground of the Christ Life – in fact, through the Incarnation, the Christ Life is the way Jesus embraced His human life – in subordination to the Father’s will. When we align our desires and our wills with Jesus – and accomplish the Father’s will in the world, we are fertile soil that cooperates with and nourishes the Seed (Christ Life) bringing forth God’s Reign a hundred fold more than we could imagine.

This is all well and good in theory, but how do we align our will and our desires with Jesus? Simply put, by attending to him, by prayer. He is fully alive (the same yesterday, today and forever, as the Book of Hebrews asserts) and fully attending to us, as we are and where we live. But we are intelligent and willful in our human condition – and if we don’t attend to him and embrace the will of the Father we will our own destruction. Our truly HUMAN flourishing depends on living the Christ

Life; on letting the seed of God's Word find a home in our consciousness as good soil for the new life of God's self that longs to dwell within us.

This mystery is so amazing that, when one grasps it, human death holds no threat because, in the Christ Life, death is the passage to the fullness of life, rather than the end of life. The Korean Martyrs "got" this as did the Martyrs of El Salvador, of Japan, of North America, of Nazi Germany, and of many other generations and cultures. Martyrs remind us that there is a mystery so fulfilling that it is worth all that we have to find, and let it grow to fullness within us as we cooperate with grace.

With the psalmist we are wise to sing: "I will walk in the presence of God, in the light of the living."
(Ps 56.10)

Eileen Burke-Sullivan - Creighton Division of Mission and Ministry