

Commentary on the Gospel for Wed, Nov 25th 2015

When I first looked at today's readings, I thought, "How will I manage to reflect well on anything but the line, 'I myself will give you wisdom in speaking?'" The first reading seemed harsh on the party-goers terrified by the disembodied hand. (Wouldn't you be more than a little freaked out?) I felt out of my depth with the rest of the Gospel passage on suffering, never having experienced such persecution myself. But, that one line struck me.

I imagine it stuck out for me because I had been asking for "wisdom in speaking" during the week when the Creighton community lost four students in a tragic car accident, now a month ago. Planning a funeral liturgy with a bereaved family is never easy. There is never a "right thing to say" entering into a friend's grief, much less a stranger's. There are even fewer things to say when the family has lost someone unexpectedly, especially someone young. There is just being present.

As a funeral planner and music minister in a Catholic parish, my ministry is to bring the family into the beauty of the Catholic funeral rites. The rites use sacred text, music, ritual, and Sacrament to help them say goodbye, pray together, and find hope in Christ's Resurrection. Part of my role is to let them know that, in the midst of their grief, at least someone knows what to do. I'm sure I can come off as business-like rather than empathetic. "Who will do the second reading? We still need gift bearers, too." I frequently come off as the bad guy, especially to those who don't regularly practice their faith with a worshipping community. "I'm sorry, we can't use your loved one's favorite Broadway / pop / country / jazz standard etc. during the Mass." The other part of my role is bringing people into liturgical prayer through song. Quite frankly, I can't sing if I'm crying with everyone.

Still, I wanted to say the right things, or at least not say the wrong things. I was nervous about entering into such a painful time for the family whose daughter's funeral was at St. John's, our parish church.

When I looked back at these readings, I saw a little bit of a connection. The first reading tells us to remember the sacred. The king and his companions had forgotten – they used the temple vessels for a party. "What's the difference?" you might ask. "A cup is a cup." Yes. But these cups were sacred. They had been specially set aside for God. Their purpose was to be more than just a cup. Their purpose was to remind the people to look towards God, to sacrifice for God. The cups themselves had been given to God. To use them otherwise was a way of forgetting to look towards God. That's why we use sacred music for Catholic liturgies, too, even if it seems "a song is a song, what's the difference?" Secular songs may speak in part to our faith, for those who can see God in all things; but they often distract, because they are not meant to lead us towards God. Sacred music has been set aside for God. Its purpose is more than to entertain or express our emotions on a given day, though it may do those things. It is about us as Church, looking towards God, listening, calling back. Its purpose is to draw us into prayer where we may develop a relationship with God.

The first reading asks us to remember that the sacred points us towards God, who is the real priority, not the sacred things themselves. The Gospel reminds us that if a relationship with God is central to our lives, the right words will come when we need them. I found myself inspired during that funeral planning meeting. I did not have the right words, but the family did. I saw that they had built up a relationship with God already, probably through daily and weekly practices that didn't mean much at the time. They were able to lean on that relationship in suffering, miraculously approaching this

tragedy with gratitude for their daughter's joyful life and with hope in her continuing joy with God.

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