

Commentary on the Gospel for Fri, Jan 15th 2016

Today is the first week of liturgical “ordinary time.” But is any time truly “ordinary” if we are aware of God’s presence in our lives? If we stop to reflect, aren’t the simple acts of tying a shoe, sharing a meal, listening to birds sing, watching a baby take tentative first steps, basking in the smile of a loved one, truly extraordinary? As Gerard Manley Hopkins said “The world is charged with the grandeur of God” so how can there ever be an “ordinary” time?

However, beyond the “ordinariness” of today in the liturgical year, there are some powerful messages about faith in the readings. Samuel served his people at a time when they were moving from tribes and coalitions into nationhood. He was both Judge and Prophet, but as his time waned, the people of Israel lost faith in their governance model and asked him to anoint a king to lead them. Samuel tried to point out all the negative consequences of a king, but the people insisted on a political leader similar to those in neighboring countries. So he prayed over this request, and after listening to God, eventually anointed Saul, the first king of Israel.

By insisting on a temporal king I think the people of Israel in one sense were expressing their lack of faith that God would continue to guide and protect them. They placed more trust in political solutions than in God’s providential care for them as a people.

On the other end of the faith spectrum is the paralytic’s entreaties to Jesus. Here is a man who exhibits pure faith that God will cure him and that Jesus is God’s instrument in doing so. The man has no doubt that Jesus can help him, nor any trust that his neighbors can relieve his afflictions. So he acts on his faith in the Lord, unlike the people of Israel, who acted on faith in their own ambitions.

I don’t think the book of Samuel is calling us to form theocracies, no more than I think Mark is suggesting we do not seek medical self-help to the extent humanly possible. But I do think that there is an important faith lesson here. We run the risk of repeating the sin of Adam and Eve when we place too much trust in ourselves, and our human strengths, and not in God. We should do what we can to live our lives in personal and political harmony with each other. We should rely on the human wisdom we have gained through the gifts of the Holy Spirit. But we should never forget the ultimate source of all the good we have is our Creator God.

I think it is tempting to place too much faith in scientific advances and forget to have the faith to keep them in proper perspective with our faith in God. Let me share an example. Our former President, Fr. John Schlegel, SJ, recently died of pancreatic cancer. When he was diagnosed less than a year ago, after consultation with his physicians he realized any treatments would be more devastating than helpful, and would only prolong his life by a few months. After much prayer, he felt called to forego treatment and to live with the reality of his disease and impending death. What a testament to faith in God!! While other people receiving a similar diagnosis might conclude they should seek treatment, John knew that God would partner with him through this last human experience, and that the quality of his life was more important than the quantity.

So is this an “ordinary time?” I don’t think so. How can it be when faith is alive in our world? If we only take the time to stop and look and listen to the wonders that surround us each moment of each day, how could we conclude this is an “ordinary time?” And ultimately, how can there be any

ordinariness, when we live in a world that is continually charged with the grandeur of God?

And so my prayer today is for the grace to keep faith in the forefront of my conscious acts, faith in the God who made and sustains me, and faith in the love that God manifests in my each waking moment.

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