

Commentary on the Gospel for Sat, Aug 20th 2016

Memorial of Saint Bernard, Abbot and Doctor of the Church

The Gospel lesson for today sets forth Jesus' teaching about life together in his kingdom. Because the Church is made up of human beings, there will be the temptation to strive for positions of power and prestige. Jesus shows his followers that the way of exaltation is humility and that the greatest among his children will be the one who becomes a servant of all.

The first principle Jesus gives is that those who would teach others must practice what they preach. This was brought home to me very forcefully at my diaconal ordination when the archbishop handed me the book of the Gospel and then said, "Receive the Gospel of Christ, whose herald you now are. Believe what you read, teach what you believe, and practice what you teach." I once had an educator in a church I served who said that a person really does not know something until they put it into practice and tell others about it. There were many orthodox teachers in Jesus' day but the problem he had with them was that they were long on telling others what to do and short on doing it themselves.

The second principle he mentions is that leaders should not tie up heavy burdens and lay them on peoples' shoulders and then not lift a finger to help them. Early on as a Christian minister (I used to be a Protestant pastor) I was called to a nursing home to baptize an 80-year-old woman, the sweetest person on the face of the planet. I took one of our elders with me. Now, we believed that only immersion was baptism so we had to baptize the woman in a bathtub. The dear sweet lady was sitting in the bathtub and the water was up high enough to immerse her by having her simply slide down into the water. I sat at the edge of the tub, the elder sat at the foot of the tub, and a nurse stood at the head of the tub. After some nice conversation I said the right words and then proceeded to help the woman slide down into the water. The problem was that she was a good sized woman and the bathtub wasn't that large and when her head went down into the water either a foot or a knee or something would pop up out of the water. After our first attempt, the elder said, "She wasn't immersed." Now, she was, of course, but not all at the same time! He sat there like a judge announcing whether or not we had gotten her all the way under but he never did anything to help the woman or me. After about three attempts, the nurse finally said, "I think she has gotten wet enough." Throughout it all our sister kept smiling even as I went away with a frown on my face. It made me wonder how many times I had been just like that elder.

Finally, Jesus teaches against the desire for places, seats, and greetings of honor. There are teachers, fathers, and masters in this world but Jesus does not want his followers to clamor for titles of respect that do nothing but puff them up. Jesus is not forbidding a teacher from being called "Teacher." He is not forbidding a father from being called "Father." Even the Apostle Paul used the term "father" for his relationship to people and churches. The point he is bringing home to us is that we are not to clamor for honor and respect. It is through service that we become great. It is through humility that we

are exalted.

George Butterfield-Creighton University's School of Law