

Commentary on the Gospel for Thu, Feb 23rd 2017

Today is the celebration of St. Polycarp, a martyr of the early Catholic Church. Polycarp connects the apostles and the early church fathers according to some sources who identify Polycarp as a direct student of the apostle John. He is said to have served as the Bishop of Smyrna and defended early Christianity against heretics. His martyrdom was a well-documented event. He was an old man when the Romans arrested him and offered him his life if he would declare that “Caesar is Lord.” I love the answer that was ascribed to him: “Eighty-six years I have served Christ, and He never did me any wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?” His faith resulted in his being burned at the stake.

While many around the world are still persecuted for their faith, the question asked of most of us is much simpler. Do we live our faith against the daily challenges – not necessarily threatening us with martyrdom yet requiring us to resist the temptations that encourage us to declare (in word or action) that modern day Caesar (in a variety of forms) is Lord. I hesitate to count the number of times my feet of clay fail to live my faith. More than in the commission of acts that violate my faith, my omissions are my shortcomings in living my faith.

Our first reading is from Sirach and reminds us that it is the grace of God that saves us – not our money, our strength, our egos or arrogance. We are urged to not delay “our conversion to the Lord.” We cannot take for granted that we can do whatever and still expect forgiveness. Thinking about St. Polycarp and his perspective, we need to keep our focus on Christ/God and not betray our relationship with Him. We are bombarded everyday with temptations of this world, yet this is the “temporary” part of our lives and, it behooves us to make decisions that have the best impact on the “permanent” part of our lives, the eternal part!! As the responsorial psalm proclaims, Blessed are they who hope in the Lord.

In the gospel, Jesus is teaching his disciples and helping them to understand the expectations. I couldn't really understand the true meaning of this until I read the three verses that came before.

John said to him, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." But Jesus said, "Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us.

With this context, the gospel started to make more sense to me. Jesus is telling his disciples to not judge others and that actions in the name of Christ (such as the giving of water) will be recognized.

The next verses that were quite uncomfortable for me to read also made more sense. Jesus is basically saying to the disciples, Hey . . . Before you start pointing that finger at others, look at the three fingers pointing back at you! He challenges the disciples [and us] to look at themselves [ourselves] and recognize those temptations that cause us to sin. Take care of these things before you judge what others do.

The idea of salt as a preservative as something that can purify is important here. Jesus is reminding the disciples that they are not the only ones that have this salt and fire. Yet even salt can lose its “power” and it becomes ineffective in doing what it is meant to do. So, there is some scolding here to the

disciples with the message that first, they need to keep the salt in themselves. They need to keep the ability to preserve what is right and get themselves right before any judgement of others. It is clear to me that whenever Jesus teaches a lesson to the disciples particularly about their own behavior, attitudes, or actions, that lesson is pointed directly at me as well. I must, first and foremost, focus on my life and keeping the commandments as was emphasized a couple of Sundays ago.

Back to the first part of the Responsorial Psalm:

Blessed the man [and woman] who follows not the counsel of the wicked

Nor walks in the way of sinners, nor sits in the company of the insolent,

But delights in the law of the Lord and meditates on his law day and night.

Bottomline: take care of our own “house” before criticizing others . . .

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