

Commentary on the Gospel for Fri, Feb 1st 2013

When I was younger there was a popular phrase “Keep the Faith, baby!” This saying was (as far as I can determine) first popularized by New York Congressman Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., as a means to galvanize his supporters when he was facing political and legal difficulties. But the sentiment of faith in the face of adversity is, I suppose, as old as humanity. It calls us to understand and accept what is important in our lives and to remain steadfast in those beliefs in the face of criticism, and even physical harm, from those who don’t respect our faith traditions.

The other theme from Hebrews that resonates with me is the clause “joined in the sufferings of those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property.” This is a very Jesuit concept. It speaks to me of being for and with others and being detached from the material gifts of this world. I find myself always struggling to be more aware and involved with the suffering of others, to share their sorrows by offering my support and solace. I also struggle with being emotionally detached from holding too closely, and putting too much value on, the many good things I have received in life.

It can be easy to ignore the suffering of those who are in the various prisons where they might find themselves – prisons that are not just physical detention centers, but the prisons of disease, financial challenges, mental anguish, addictions, abusive relationships, workplace stress, persistent unemployment, violence and repression. And we can be easily seduced to conclude that the bounty of material items, freedom from want, privilege, insulation from conflict and confrontation, and safety from personal harm is a birthright instead of a wonderful gift.

Those of us who live in western society can easily forget that we generally live at the top of the historical pyramid of human privilege, and the benefits we enjoy are because of our good fortune in being born into this world in this place at this particular point in human history. Even people in our societies who struggle for the daily means of existence are still in some ways (due to our governmental and private “safety nets”) better off than the poor and downtrodden of 2,000 years ago.

And so when the Hebrews author encourages us to “keep the faith” by not forgetting the ways in which we shared in the sufferings of those in prison, it really reminds us to keep demonstrating our faith by continuing to share in those confinements, however they are created for our sisters and

brothers. And when we are told we have joyfully accepted the confiscation of our property, I think it really means to be mindful of the need to detach our true selves from the wondrous bounty that surrounds us, and to realize that the true gift we have received is not physical things that will fade away, but the salvation we receive from trusting in the Lord. We keep our faith by keeping our focus, by committing our way to that of the Lord.

And so my prayer today is twofold – deep gratitude for the many gifts I have received that enable me to live the life I enjoy, and resolve that I may share more fully in the sufferings of my sisters and brothers and detach myself more intentionally from holding my gifts too closely and selfishly.

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