

Commentary on the Gospel for Fri, Feb 22nd 2013

If we couple today's Gospel with several other New Testament texts on authority (including today's first reading from the First Letter of Peter) we recognize that Jesus is giving to Peter and to the Church his own power – that is the power to reveal the Reign of God in the world throughout history. Jesus is handing on His mission from God to the disciples – and specifically to Peter in this Matthean version of this text – to carry on His work of disclosing the compassion of God made evident by the way he lived out his life and death. The ultimate expression of Divine authority is manifest in the person of Jesus of Nazareth (Matthew explicitly states this in 28.18) and he challenges his disciples to exercise the authority he is giving them/us precisely by laying down their/our lives for the world.

It is obvious to us that Jesus' sense of authority is not easily grasped in our culture and time or in any era of human history. Not only does he have to catechize his followers a number of times on the issue, he has to witness it by his behavior in every relationship in his life and ultimately in the manner of his death. And they/we still don't get it! Jesus never "flaunts" power over anyone or coerces anyone to do his will. He invites, challenges, seduces by love, all behaviors that leave the other free to embrace or reject his desire. He gives us the freedom from the consequences of sin so that we are free to say yes, but He never takes away the power to say no.

Within Christian history this Gospel testimony has not been regularly heeded – and the consequence in every instance has been the failure of the Church to fulfill the mission of Christ. The human heart is turned to bitterness and revenge when the Church has raised a sword of conquest rather than the hand of mercy; the community of believers has been torn in shreds when ecclesial pompousness and greed refused to hear the cry of the poor begging for Good News.

Even the text of today's Gospel (whatever you bind . . . whatever you loose . . .) is often understood to mean that the Church 'controls' the distribution of God's mercy – but a more accurate interpretation of binding and loosing is to see them as parallels rather than opposites: whenever the Church chooses to bind up the wounds of the world, God is binding those wounds. When the Church looses the chains of sin's power, God frees the human heart to forgive and to love. The "keys" to the Reign of God are the manner and pattern of Jesus' ministerial response: the keys of humble service in life and through death.

Given all this, how ought we to respond to the authority of the papacy today? We American Catholics live and breathe an anti-authoritarian culture. We love to hate authority figures. Our current culture loves to make fun of and disparage those who bear the burden and responsibility for leading, and to tell them how poorly they are doing. Some of our stance is historically due to poorly implemented leadership, but much of it is simply the consequence of sin in our lives. Under the bonds of sin I don't want to be liberated and led toward the Kingdom of God because I would generally rather worship myself as god.

The truth is, I grant authority to the one who does for me what I cannot do for myself. God alone is the ultimate doer of what needs to be done for me – thus he has ultimate authority. If he has chosen to give that authority into the hands of fallible humans to exercise on his behalf then I have a call to listen and obey for the sake of my own life – if I want to live in joy and peace.

The papacy is blest in our time to be free from ownership of vast properties, the scandal of the profits of human serfs, and from the political entanglements, armies and war paraphernalia that weighed it down in other eras. The papacy is blest with the authority and opportunity to speak on behalf of human rights and human dignity – but the effectiveness of that authority is realized by the exercise of compassion and humility of the office holder. It is a great moment of grace for the Church of our time that Pope Benedict XVI began his pontifical service with an Encyclical Letter on the Love of God and now ends it in a gesture of generosity by resigning for the sake of the Church in the face of his growing limitations. In the words of today's first reading we must all pray lovingly for him and for all presbyters among us: that they witness to the sufferings of Christ; that they tend to the flock willingly and not for profit, and that they serve humbly, not lording it over those assigned. For the next man to be chosen to sit on the Chair of Peter we pray for wisdom and faithfulness to the Spirit. For ourselves we pray for the humility and good sense to obey the right exercise of leadership . . .so that the Kingdom may come on earth as it is in heaven.

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