

30C SML 2019
LK 18:9-14

This past summer, I preached about all of us being on a journey in pursuit of something, more immediately:

- ✓ pursuing an education
- ✓ pursuing employment
- ✓ pursuing a spouse

you name it. All of us, however, are pursuing our life's goal, we are all on the journey to see and be with God for all eternity after we die. And, as much as we look forward to seeing and being with God, it is an anomaly for most that it's also a meeting most of us like to put off as long as possible and many people do not like to even think about it. There is the tension. The faithful: the faith filled. My mother was afraid to die. She wasn't perfect. No saint ever was, but she was afraid to die. The faithless: a recent survey said 40% of people don't even ask themselves whether or not they will get to heaven. 40%! are not even thinking in these terms. Why? Our fear of dying is prompted by sin, a lack of confident trust in the love of God. There is tension.

What would it be like for a sinless person to enter into death? In my homily on the Feast of the Assumption, I preached about the end of Mary's life on earth. Whether she died a natural death and then was assumed into heaven, or

she “fell asleep” on earth and woke up in heaven, we do not know because the Church has not formal teaching on this. However, since Mary was sinless, we know she did not fear death nor did she put it off as long as possible. For Mary, there was no tension. She just graciously accepted.

But for us “tense” Christians, we are conscious of the fact that life is a journey, a travelling towards a goal, where at the end of all the problems of life, lies the total solution, not our work, but God’s.

And we are powerless in the face of our unquenchable thirst for our destiny and our goal, and only the power of God can make us whole. But the search for ever greater completeness, the search for the Best - as far as possible – characterizes a Christian’s greatness at every moment; and this at every moment, is the characteristic of the Church, to help us on our journey. It is a boundless commitment, on our part, and on the part of the Church, to help us on our journey, until the journey is completed.

Today’s gospel compares two moral attitudes: that of the Pharisee and that of a publican. Remember the Pharisees proudly considered themselves the faithful custodians of the divine laws, while the publicans, who collected taxes for the Roman Empire, were generally exposed as sinners.

Jesus condemns the moral attitude of the Pharisee, because the Pharisee is so proud of himself. It is as if:

- ✓ he has completed his journey,
- ✓ he has nothing to learn,
- ✓ and has arrived.

He evades the tension of life's journey that searches for ever greater completeness, the search for the best, and he needs no one's help:

- ✓ not his brother Pharisees,
- ✓ not his temple
- ✓ or his synagogue.

Nope, he has arrived. That's the point of the parable.

However, listen to the publican, who expresses himself in a most basic formula, a sorrowful uneasiness with himself, a tension. And there is no more stark contrast to him than the person who is complacent and self-satisfied. In other words, if I were to ask who here would like a better, more complete relationship with Jesus, I'd hope every hand would go up. I can't imagine anyone in this Church saying, "Nope, I'm good." Well sadly, the Pharisee's hand would not go up.

The constant searching by the Christian for self-truth, brings what Jesus calls "peace." In the Mass, right after we pray the "Our Father," the priest continues:

Deliver us, Lord, we pray, from every evil,
Graciously grant “peace” in our days,
That by the help of your mercy,
We may be always free from sin
And “safe from all distress,”
And we await the blessed hope
And the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

All of the elements of a moral tension are contained in this prayer:

- ✓ acknowledged dependence of God
- ✓ in Whose hands I fearlessly remain
- ✓ an affirmation that the goal of life is God
- ✓ therefore the hope of my destiny is God
- ✓ and the need to live a life of expectancy and searching
- ✓ on a journey in which every emptiness is ever filled.

This peace cannot last if it does not rest on the Lord. That’s a given. Without this final context, this peace will be fragile and will crumble into anxiety.

Faithfulness in following Jesus can be a struggle, which is not the opposite of peace. Though it may be painful or heavy, it is not anxiety. Anxiety is a lie that emerges to impede our reliance on Christ.

There is a scene in Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* that, when Jesus was given His Cross, Our Blessed

Lord embraced the cross as if He welcomed the Cross. One of those crucified with Him made fun of Him, giving the impression that this is not something that someone who is about to be crucified typically does. While this particular portrayal of Jesus embracing His Cross is not in the Gospel, it does express well Isaiah 53 that Our Blessed Lord went along willingly.

Why?

Why embrace the instrument of your death?

Why embrace that which will bring you excruciating pain?

Because it is the way of love. In love Jesus embraced His Cross because He knew it was not just the instrument of His death, but the instrument of our life and redemption, of the restoration of man to God. So, yes, love.

In love He created us;

in love He became incarnate for us;

and in love He redeemed us.

To embrace our own cross and follow Him, is to do the same. The crosses of life are inescapable. We can neither run nor hide from them. And if we simply carry them relying on our own strength, we will find that we are weak. Crosses are facts of life, and there is only one response that does not result in our being crushed: to embrace it and carry it with Jesus.

For me, I try to embrace my crosses because I know they will keep me humbly close to Our Blessed Lord. Looking back over my life? When was I closest to the Lord? When I carried crosses too heavy to carry alone, and so I gave them to the Lord to carry with me. Jesus is my personal Simon of Cyrene if you will. The difference is Jesus and I are carrying my cross, not His. You can carry your crosses alone, as do the unbelievers, or you can carry them with Jesus, as a believer. The choice is obvious.

This is why we cannot witness the Christian message as if it were easy, as if we have already arrived where we want to be. It's forever a journey, a struggle to be better than we are, to be closer to Jesus than we are. And all this happens in the awareness that:

- ✓ this life is a journey in search for the Lord
- ✓ unlike the Pharisee in today's gospel, we will never be satisfied until we have completed it
- ✓ there is a tension as we search for the Best, as we search for completeness
- ✓ Crosses we will always have.
- ✓ And you can choose to carry them alone, as an unbeliever,
- ✓ Or as a believer, you can carry them with Christ.