

St. Ann's Church – Washington, DC

17th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year A – July 26, 2020 – Feast of St. Ann

Homily by Msgr. Watkins, Pastor

My dear Parishioners and Friends of St. Ann's Church here in Washington, DC.

I greet all of you who join us in the pews today as we continue to re-open gradually and accommodate parishioners who return to Mass, and to those who join us by way of electronic media today, I welcome you and invite you to participate in spiritual communion with us on this Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time and, in a special way, as we celebrate the patronal Feast of St. Ann and St. Joachim, the parents of the Blessed Virgin and Grandparents of Jesus. In fact, we have a beautifully restored statue of St. Ann with her holy daughter in the sanctuary today to commemorate the Feast by Susie Chorro and Bill Adair of Gold Leaf Studios here in Washington. Susie and Bill are here today with us in person, and we thank them for this incredibly beautiful art of restoration, which they donated to our parish after many weeks of pain-staking and artistic labor. Thank you, Susie and Bill!

Today, let's reflect on the Dream Solomon had as we read from the Book of Kings and think about our own dreams in light of his, because dreams are an important indicator of our desires, hopes, fears, joys, and sorrows, challenges and mysteries of life. And God said to Solomon, "Ask something of me and I will give it to you." What an amazing offer! Think of all the things Solomon could have asked for. He didn't ask for riches or a long life, things which most people would often think of first – important but stuff of the world. No, Solomon asked for Understanding, for Wisdom. This is why we often speak of the wisdom of Solomon. A wise person chooses carefully, having reflected on what is REALLY important, most substantial, most meaningful and purposeful. And for this reason, we are told that God said to him, "Because you have asked for this – not for a long life for yourself, nor for riches, ... but for understanding so that you may know what is right – I do as you requested." The wisdom of Solomon to know, to understand right from wrong, truth versus falsity, good versus evil, wisdom versus folly. Isn't that, in part, what we all want from God? Maybe? Maybe not.

See, dear friends, we as Christian believers, are members IN this world, but we are not essentially members OF this world. Yes, we live and move and have our being IN the world. We have to work, to pay our bills, provide and shelter our children, get up each day and do something IN the world and even FOR the world given our own station in life and all that is expected of us to survive and even find some relative joy amidst the struggles and challenges of daily living. Not easy often, but we do it because we are IN the world. But, we are not as such OF the world. What do I mean? Solomon was able to make that distinction in a sense because he was granted the gift of Understanding, of Wisdom, to know the difference among all the priorities which occupied him as a King, a ruler with incredible responsibilities to his people. Breaking it down, as it were, he was able to discern carefully what was most important in his life, namely, to know and to serve the Lord his God with all his heart, all his soul.

Of all the things I remembered most in my Sunday School classes as a young boy was one of the first tenets of the old Baltimore Catechism: "Why did God make me? God made me to know, to love, and to serve Him in this life, so that I might come to know, to love, and to serve Him most perfectly in the next." In other words, priorities, the understanding that everything I have in this life, every person, every place, every thing is a MEANS to that END. Everything I have in this life is designed to be the MEANS by which I come closer to my primary vocation which is to know, to love, and to serve the Lord my God. Now, this is not easy for a lot of us. Why? Because we so often get caught up with the stuff OF the world and forget that we are not designed ultimately to be members OF the world. We often lose sight and perspective and get confused about who we really are as individual persons making our way through life with all of its demands and temptations to be someone other than what God created us to be. As we've said so often, we only remember WHO we are when we understand WHOSE we are. We belong to God. We don't belong to the world. So, Solomon got that distinction. He understood rightly that the most effective way he could govern his people as a great King was to recognize WHO he was by remembering WHOSE he was. He was made to know, to love, and to serve the Lord his God with all his heart, all his soul. Again, "Why did God make me? God made me to know, to love and serve Him in this life that I might do so most perfectly in the next." In other words, the wisdom Solomon enjoyed came from that special gift of

Understanding that every person, every place, and every thing in the life may be important and valuable, beautiful and meaningful, attractive and powerful, but none of those persons, places, and things can every so occupy my mind and heart that I lose sight of the One who made all these for me to enjoy. They are but MEANS and not ENDS in themselves. Nice distinction. Again, as I've said, that is not always so easy to remember. So often we esteem so much value to the ones we love, to the places we love, to the things we love that we forget that the greatest, the greatest importance and value is God. In fact, we believe that GOD is the most important person in my life (indeed, the Three Persons in God are the most important Persons: the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit.) And the most important PLACE in my life is where I can experience His divine presence among us, a sacred place, set aside from the world to convey that presence in its most authentic way. And the most important thing in my life is, for us believers, the Sacrifice of the Mass, which makes possible my holy Communion with Him under forms of Bread and Wine which become the most precious Body and Blood of Jesus. In fact, we find all of the most important Person, Place, and Thing (if you will) right here every time we come to Mass. For us, the Mass is THE priority of the Catholic Christian life. We say that the holy Eucharist is the "source and summit" of our lives. Here we experience God made man again, re-presented in fullness through the spiritual communion of His life, death, and resurrection. From here we take back into the world all of the graces we need to face another day of work and challenge, of joys and sorrows. The Mass provides us the Person, the Place, and the Thing to do all of this with perspective, with understanding. Perhaps if you or I were asked in a dream by God tonight, "Just what do you request, just one thing, and I will grant it," what would you say. For me as a priest, I remember a little prayer (which is printed out and framed in the sacristy) which I like to say every time I vest and prepare for Mass, which reads, "Priest of God, say this Mass as if it were your first Mass, your last Mass, your only Mass." I try to remember that as best I can. When I came to you as a younger priest 31 years ago as a newly ordained priest at St. Ann's Parish, I remember saying that little prayer, and it has stuck with me ever since. I suppose if God were to invite me to ask for one thing right now, I'd have to ask that I would offer this Mass and every Mass as if it were my first, my last, my only Mass. Why? Because the Mass is the true means of salvation afforded me in this life. Here I remember WHO I am by recalling WHOSE I am. Here I experience the closest I can get to God this

side of heaven in the Body and Blood of the God-Man, Jesus. Here at Mass, I'm surrounded by the Angels and Saints who intercede for me and come to my aid. Here I experience you parishioners who seek to understand what I believe, what WE believe as the deposit of Faith handed down by Jesus Christ to Peter and the Apostles and their successors for 2000 years until the end of time. Here I begin again each time to re-set my balance in life, as I put aside for the moment all of the other priorities of life (all of the many persons, places, and things which may be so beautiful and meaningful and lovely and sources of joy) and see them all in proper perspective as MEANS to God, and not as ENDS in themselves. For, no other person, place, or thing could ever be MORE important in my life than Jesus. And where do I find HIM? Well, here, in this sacred place, day after day in the holy Eucharist, especially where He waits silently to feed me, to nourish and sustain me, to enrich my life IN this world so that I can come to know, to love and to serve Him most perfectly in the next. Here, all of the graces are afforded me to love my neighbor as myself.

See, when we think about all of those persons, places, and things, which are important in our lives, there's a tendency in the culture to put all of them on a par with God, to say, that everything beautiful, everything truthful, every good person, place and thing is a divine presence and therefore God Himself. Well, actually, that's a gross misunderstanding, a heresy (we call that Pantheism). In other words, the heresy of Pantheism claims that God is everywhere. God is in me, God is in you, God is in nature (the birds, the bees, the trees, the wild blue yonder), God is in the animals, especially my dog or cat, God is in the smile on my baby's face, God is in food and drink, God is in the sunrise and sunset and God is all around me. In one sense, that's actually true, but only true by ANALOGY of Being and not by IDENTITY of Being. See, if we misunderstand the claim, "God is everywhere," we run the dangerous risk of viewing every person, place, and thing as God. That's we call Idolatry! For this reason, the First Commandment God gave Moses is the most critical: "I alone am the Lord your God. You shall not have strange gods before you." In other words, no person (as wonderful and beautiful and loving as he or she may be), no place (as wonderful and beautiful as it may be), no thing or animal or plant or experience or memory or food or drink or that perfect vacation spot or restaurant or piece of art or clothing or whatever (as fabulous and wonderful and beautiful and soooo attractive as it might be), must,

alas, never be as important a priority of our time, energy, and service than the Lord God. "One alone is the Lord your God. You shall not have strange gods before you." So, we remember this Commandment not because it enslaves us or coerces us, or make me feel guilty or selfish. No, we are called to enjoy, that is, take joy in all of these wonderful and beautiful persons, places and things as MEANS to glorify God and BY them to come to know, to love, and to serve Him this in life that we might do most perfectly in the next. They are all MEANS. In other words, USE them! WHAT? "USE THEM?" That sounds disrespectful, abusive, hardly proper and loving. No, dear friends, the entire universe was created as an outward demonstration of the love of God who desires nothing more in return from our that our willing souls who make Him first in our lives and see HIM as the ultimate END of our lives and that nothing, no person, no place, no thing, nothing else gets in that way. No to disparage the world and its wonderful and beautiful gifts, but to place all of that, to enjoy all of that by relationship to Him. Because if we don't do that, then we will get confused, then we give into the relativism and the personal subjectivism of the culture around us that ultimately wants us FOR the world, to remain IN the world, and to forget who we are by confusing us about WHOSE we are. This has always been the word of the Evil One who deceives and whose cunning deceptions end us making us very frustrated, even angry, and lost souls.

Where your heart is, there you will find your treasure. So, applying all of this to the Gospel today, we learn that the PEARL of life is our greatest treasure. Reflect on that Pearl, as it were. What is it? Who is it? Where is it? (Person, Place, or Thing? Maybe it's a string of Pearls. Keep the Pearl or Pearls in perspective. In other words, we seek happiness in a world of comfort but find only monotony. We search for satisfaction in a world of pleasure but find only discontent. We look for power in the world of affluence but find only disillusion. We are forced to conclude that our life is devoid of true meaning because it might be devoid of God, of Jesus, of Mary, of the Angels and all the Saints, of the Mass and the Sacraments and Scripture and the Mysteries of Faith. Well, if you are looking for that Pearl or Pearls, the finest, the most beautiful, the most incredibly wonderful treasure? It's here, He's here, and he we are. You've found it. Treasure that Pearl carefully. Invest in it. Share it. Jesus is the most satisfying Pearl we could ever hope to have, now in the life, and the most perfectly in the next.