

“Being Watchful for the Lord with Righteous Deeds and Living Practice of the Faith”
Homily for Mass of the First Sunday of Advent, Year “B”
St. Mary’s Cathedral
November 29, 2020

Introduction

As today marks the First Sunday of Advent, we of course begin a new liturgical year in the life of the Church. It always occurs at this time, toward the end of the calendar year; New Year’s Day is just a little bit over a month away. I’m sure this is one year we all cannot wait to get far behind us. It’s been a very hard year with much suffering in many different ways, including spiritual suffering. We here in San Francisco as also San Mateo have now been moved back into the purple tier, the most restrictive tier, as we try to get control of the spread of the coronavirus. So it creates a lot of hardship for us in so many different ways.

Covenants

I think you may be feeling with me the prayer of Isaiah, which we heard in our first reading, to the Lord: “Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, while you wrought awesome deeds we could not hope for.” We just want the Lord to leap down from Heaven and put an end to all of this. When we listen closely to the prophets and psalmists of old, we see a consistent message here: the suffering the people are enduring is the result of the people’s sins. This is so clear in just this brief passage from Isaiah today. He says, “Behold you are angry, we are sinful. All of us have become like unclean people. Our guilt carries us away like the wind.”

This is really a lament after the return from the exile. This is the time in their history when the kingdom had been invaded and destroyed, and the people were exiled. Then they returned, but the Temple had not yet been rebuilt. So there’s this lament because the people have not yet been restored to their religious practice and their religious identity. So I think we’re kind of kindred spirits with them at this time. But Isaiah understood this exile as a punishment for their sin, especially because of their refusal to be faithful to the covenant that the Lord – that is, the one true God – made with them. Instead they would make covenants with their pagan neighbors.

These covenants were like agreements or pacts that had mutual rights and obligations, and the people were expected to fulfill all of the precepts of those covenants; a blessing was pronounced upon those who did so, and a curse upon those who violated them. So the Lord, the true God, made a Covenant with the people of Israel. They were a rather small, insignificant people, when we consider what the world was like in the ancient Near East at that time. So they were envious of the might, the power, and the prosperity of these pagan neighbors of theirs. And so they would make covenants with them. And part of a nation’s making a covenant is that they would worship the other’s god. So they went over to idol worship; they returned to paganism.

Be Watchful

And so we hear this message at this time in Advent that goes with the message from Isaiah. We hear in the Gospel Our Lord teaching us to be watchful – to be watchful, to be alert. This is how the whole reading is encompassed, in this command: be watchful, be alert; and then it concludes, “What I say to you I say to all, watch.” This watchfulness here in this First Sunday of Advent, this early period in the season of Advent, is continuing the theme, the reminder, we hear at the end of the liturgical year, which we heard especially in the last three Sundays at the

end of the liturgical year. Actually, the opening prayer for our Mass today is a summary of the Gospel readings of the last three Sundays.

Those Gospel readings came from the 25th chapter of St. Matthew's Gospel. There are three sections to that chapter, and each Sunday was a different section, leading up to last Sunday, the Solemnity of Christ the King. We prayed in our opening prayer today, "Grant your people we pray Almighty God," first, "the resolve to run forth to meet your Christ." So this going forth to meet Christ is the cry in the parable of the Ten Virgins; the five foolish and the five wise; the cry to go out and meet the Bridegroom as he is arriving late at night, as he is delayed. This is the first part of Matthew 25, the parable of the Ten Virgins. The wise ones brought oil for their lamps to keep their lamps lighted, so they could go out to meet the Bridegroom when he finally arrived. The other ones did not have oil. They went out to buy oil and then were shut out – the need to be watchful and ready.

Then the prayer continues, "so that gathered at His right hand." Being gathered at the right hand calls to mind the Gospel reading we heard last Sunday, which is the third part of Matthew 25, the famous scene of the Final Judgment, when the King divides all the world into the sheep, whom he gathers at His right, and the goats, to His left. This "gathered at the right hand" is what the scene is about: the sheep at the right hand.

And then, "that they may be worthy to possess the heavenly kingdom." Possession has a material sense, even a monetary sense; possession, right? A monetary sense then recalls the middle part of St. Matthew's Gospel that we heard two Sundays ago, which is the parable of the Three Servants to whom the master gives his talents. A talent was a very large unit of money at the time. And he entrusts these talents to them, he trusts some of his wealth to them and he expects an increase. Now, tucked in the middle of this prayer is something very important, kind of the crux of the whole thing. The prayer asks that God's people might "have the resolve to run forth to meet your Christ with righteous deeds at His coming." "Righteous deeds at His coming": we see this as the thread connecting all these three parts of Matthew 25.

Righteous Deeds

The lighted lamps of the wise virgins: those are their righteous deeds. We can go forth ready to meet Christ the Lord when he comes by carrying with us our righteous deeds. In the scene of the Final Judgment, why were the sheep judged worthy of the kingdom? Because they practiced the corporal works of mercy, the righteous deeds that are works of mercy and of charity to the needy and the suffering. The talents, too, in the parable of the Three Servants represent our righteous deeds. The master gives his servants the talents, and he expects an increase. He expects them to use them wisely, to invest them so he can get an increase. The first two do so and are rewarded; the third one, out of fear, buries it and is punished. Those talents also represent our righteous deeds.

We give God an increase when we live a life of righteousness because we spread His truth and His love. Let's be very careful when we think about what righteous deeds really mean. Going back to Isaiah, there's kind of an irony in this reading, if you look closely at it. He prays, "Would that you might meet us doing right, that we were mindful of you in our ways!" Would that the Lord "saw us doing right," that is, they're not doing right. But then later on he says, "All our good deeds are like polluted rags." Well, this implies they are doing good deeds, so supposedly righteous deeds. So what is going on here? Well, it could be a rhetorical device, as if to say our good deeds don't really exist – we don't have any good deeds, so he's being rhetorical here. That's why they're like polluted rags.

Or it could be – and we see this teaching very clearly in the prophets and certainly very clearly in our Lord’s teachings – he is referring to this feigning of doing what is right as purely external observance of the law, of doing the minimal duties but not really having our heart in it. In this sense, our righteous deeds are not really coming out of a genuine love of God and neighbor, are not motivated by our devotion to God. This, then, is how we exercise watchfulness, especially in the midst of this ongoing pandemic when it’s very tempting just to fall away from the practice of the faith, to become lazy and complacent. It’s always been a big problem, but now all the more so because righteous deeds – authentic righteous deeds – cannot happen unless they come out of a deep relationship with God and love for God.

Keeping Alive the Practice of the Faith

So, we are in danger of getting out of the habit of the practice of our faith and falling into that pattern of token external observance of just simply doing good now and then. So, we need to redouble our efforts to be attentive to keeping our faith alive in the practice of our faith, to attend Mass as we can. We keep moving back and forth in these tiers – and it is very confusing, and it is very hard on us – but avail yourself of the Mass and the sacraments as you can. God is blessing us with truly beautiful weather right now; indeed, we can honestly say there’s no better weather to have Mass outdoors than the weather we’re having right now. So, if we have to return to Mass outdoors, then avail yourself of that opportunity, if you’re healthy.

I have also asked our priests to continue to make confession available – so avail yourselves of that sacrament, especially in this time of Advent, a time of preparing for the Lord. Also, keep the faith alive in the home with prayer, especially now, in this very rich season of Advent, very rich in symbols and rituals; keep that alive in the home. This is how we continue to be faithful to God and not fall away from the practice of the faith. This is where our righteous deeds are to come from. So it is not simply a matter of doing good things so that God will do what we want Him to do. That’s not coming out of a place of love.

Yes, God will take care of us if we seek to do His will, but in His own way, according to His own plan. In His own way: we have to be aligned with God’s ways. Again Isaiah, with his proclamation to the people, in his prayer to God: “Why do you let us wander, O Lord, far from your ways?” They wandered far from His ways, and He’s allowed their hearts to be hardened. Instead we should make His ways our ways, as Isaiah prays, “Would that you might meet us doing right, so that we were mindful of you in your ways!” Despite all of this suffering, despite all of this corruption of the people, the prophets and psalmists of old do not give up hope, as with Isaiah here.

There are these two bookends of this passage. What do the bookends proclaim? At the beginning of the reading we heard, “You Lord are our Father, our redeemer you are named forever.” And then it ends with, “Yet you, O Lord, are our Father. We are the clay and you the potter; we are all the work of your hands.” God is our Father. That means He’s our Creator, we are His work – the work of His hands – and He is our Redeemer. We are His creature; it’s not vice-versa. It’s not that God is a work of our own creation so that we can turn God into whatever we want God to be, as did the ancient Israelites in the Sinai Desert when they built that golden calf. We continue to repeat that sin; humanity has repeated it ever since. .

Conclusion

No, we are in need of the redemption He offers us. Only in this honest self-assessment before God can we be in a right relationship with Him and have a deep love for Him and a

Homily, First Sunday of Advent, Year "B"

devotion to Him so that our righteous deeds can properly flow from that. Only in this way are we capable of that. It is God who makes us capable of true righteous deeds. As we prepare for the coming of the Lord, and we focus on this teaching of being watchful to follow in His ways and not to turn away, we need to take to heart that message especially now, when the temptation is particularly great to become lazy. Honor God first, and all will be well, in accordance with God's way.