

Eighteenth Sunday after Trinity
September 30, 2018
Homily for the Anglican Usage Mass
of the
St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
Scranton, PA
Mark 9:38-43, 45, 47-48

When we started Maria Kaupas Upper School earlier this month, one of the roles I assumed was history teacher. Since we are going in chronological order and this is our first year, we are studying ancient history this semester; and this past week's lessons have been about Cyrus the Great, the Persian warrior king who ruled an empire that stretched from modern-day Turkey to the borders of China.

Cyrus is a man revered among the Jewish people and is even referred to in Isaiah 45 as the Lord's anointed. They hold him in such high esteem because Cyrus is the ruler who returned the Jews to Jerusalem and even helped fund the rebuilding of the Temple, which had been destroyed by the Babylonian decades before. The Jews see Cyrus as an instrument of God's grace who lived his entire life outside of the faith, a Gentile who helped accomplish God's purposes for His chosen people.

The new Israel, of course, is the Church, and we should recall Israel's relationship to Cyrus when we hear the words from today's Gospel: "He that is not against us is for us. For truly I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ, will by no means lose his reward." We can be certain, then that there are many people like Cyrus in the world today, people who live outside the Church and yet are instruments of God's grace, people helping to restore the Church to its rightful place, just as Cyrus brought the Jews back to their proper home.

What this means is that not all the people reporting on the Church's current woes or helping to reveal her past sins are actually against the Church. I believe that among them are one large portion of Cyruses, people who aren't Catholic themselves, but who wish the Church well and want her to live according to her teachings, who desire to see a consistent witness from the largest charitable organization in the world. They are as scandalized by what has been uncovered as we are, and they know that the pursuit of the truth is never a bad thing.

Therefore, we can rejoice that the Lord is using people from outside the Church to accomplish what those inside the Church refused to do. The cleansing, the purification, that should have begun and ended years ago by the agency of our leaders is now underway, not because our leaders had a change of heart, heeded God's Word, and did what they had to do. No, the purgation of the Church is happening because God turned to a modern-day Cyrus to effect what the people of God would not. This demonstrates the degree to which the Lord is in control, of course; but it also shows how foolish the bishops were in trying to conceal what God tells us over and over again in the Scriptures must be brought to light. We see the irony here, that many outside the Church are in fact more faithful to the Truth than those inside, who should have known better. How can we lament their work, when it is doing precisely what God says must be done? To mourn the work of those journalists, and lawyers, and activists would be akin to mourning the fact that God used a Gentile, Cyrus, to bring the Jews back to Israel. Far from holding any animus, we must be grateful! How joyful we can be that he who is not against us is for us.

The implications here are twofold. First, we are never to adopt the defensive posture of the disciples at the beginning of today's Gospel, when they forbade a man doing a good work in the name of Jesus. We can't imagine that threats lurk around every corner and under every rock, but instead must set about seizing the opportunities the Lord sets before us. The very people reporting on the Church's failing are being exposed, perhaps for the first time in their lives, to what the Church actually teaches, how far she has fallen short of the Truth she proposes. And we can be sure that once they are exposed to the Truth, at least some of them will find it attractive and desire to come home. Therefore, we must treat such inquirers as potential converts, never as hostile adversaries, unless, of course, they've made explicit that they are in fact against the Church. Refute the adversaries, and thank the helpers of good will, but never be defensive.

Second, Jesus gives us the solution to dealing with the evils that beset us: remove them from our midst. Since the good is righteousness, we need to be diligent about confronting that which tempts us to sin. Jesus obviously does not want us literally to mutilate ourselves, but He does want us to cut off those who are trying to lead the little ones to sin, and He wants us to remove from our lives the near occasion of sin. Others might want to focus on who gets credit for what, but we're supposed to focus on getting holy. We do that by living in the midst of holy people and by making use of holy things.

The net effect of making God our ultimate goal is that we may find ourselves in new associations. If we don't want to be cut off from Him forever, then we need to cut off the impenitent and the wicked now. What we're talking about here are those who know what's wrong and do it anyway, not the people living profligate lives and wondering at the same time what's killing them. Just as priests convicted of abuse are removed by the Church from the clerical state, so we must definitively remove ourselves from situations that might compromise our objective. Ministering to sinners is good. Intimate association with impenitent scofflaws is not. We want to spend the bulk of our lives with those who lift us up, not with those who drag us down; for this, too, is a prefiguration of our destiny. Since our goal is heaven, and for all eternity we hope to live with the saints before the throne of grace, we should not permit our associations here to resemble a vision of hell.

Even as we cut such people off, we do not cease to pray for them, nor do we cease being charitable with them in personal interactions. Nevertheless, we must heed the Lord's warning and be aware of where such harmful associations may lead us. Thank God that He is using people outside the Church to show us who on the inside we need to think twice before trusting. We must rejoice that God is showing us before the end of time who is for us and who is against us.