

Twentieth Sunday after Trinity
October 14, 2018
Homily for the Anglican Usage Mass
of the
St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
Scranton, PA
Mark 10:17-30

When the rich young man of today's Gospel addressed Jesus and asked Him for advice, Jesus' response was to ask His own question. Jesus asked the rich young man, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone." The answer to this question would determine whether the rich young man would actually follow the counsel he was about to receive.

Remember that Jesus told the rich young man to follow the commandments, and the rich young man asserted that he had done so his whole life. Jesus then loved him and told him that he lacked one thing, that he should go and sell all he had and give to the poor. This was for the rich young man a bridge too far. His countenance fell, and he went away sorrowful. What was the one thing he lacked? The answer to this question is the same as the answer to the question Jesus posed to him at first.

The rich young man lacked faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who teaches us that God is love and in order to love God we must love our neighbor as ourselves. Very simply, the rich young man's lack of faith in Jesus Christ prevented him from exercising the charity that Jesus commanded him to undertake. Because he did not answer Jesus, "I call you good because you are the Christ, the Son of the living God," we know the outcome of the encounter before it happens. Because of his lack of faith, we know he's going to walk away and choose a different authority, a god less loving who will not demand charity of him to demonstrate his faith.

On Thursday, the pilgrims from the Ordinariate saw first hand the consequences of this lack of faith in the divinity of Jesus Christ. With Bishop Lopes, we traveled to Bethany, to the church built over the site of the house of Lazarus, Martha, and Mary. It is in the Palestinian territories, so even though it is less than two miles from Jerusalem, where we were staying just outside the walls of the Old City, it took us thirty-five minutes on a bus to drive around the wall topped by razor wire that separates the West Bank from Israel. Jesus regularly got there faster on foot.

When we finally drove into the town, our pilgrimage guide told us that of the 17,000 residents there, only about fifty Christian households remained. We were in a town almost a hundred percent Muslim, and the environment was unlike anything any of the pilgrims had seen in our lives. The amount of garbage strewn in the streets in just the first two blocks could have filled several dumpsters. However, this was not an abandoned shell of a city, but the main drag, the bustling center of commerce. When we did pass vacant lots, of which were a few, those were covered in larger pieces of garbage: mattresses, furniture, trees, entire automobiles, stripped and burned. Bishop Lopes said of a prior town, not quite as bad, "This is the sort of place you tell your mom about only after you've returned home safely." Bethany was so over the top that I wonder if he'll ever tell his widowed mother what we saw there.

Here we were in a town literally overcrowded with people who claim they honor Jesus as one of the greatest prophets. They do not pronounce his Name without nodding their heads and saying, "Peace be upon him." They believe He will come back to judge the living and the dead and even say He is the

Christ. Yet they do not believe He is God, and their lack of faith was reflected in the very streets they inhabit.

Someone on the bus, shocked by what he saw, yelled out to our pilgrimage director, “Amir, why is there so much garbage everywhere?”

Shortly after we arrived at the church, a beautiful structure built in the mid-fifties, with such beautiful acoustics I found myself wishing we had brought Mr. Campbell and our choir along. The church was immaculate, and when we went out to the rear courtyard, we saw the first lot in Bethany not covered in garbage. As we exited, we passed through a beautiful garden, with lush trees and colorful flowers, all being tended to by the gardener, hard at work. It was an oasis in the desert, and I stopped to commend him for his work. He thanked me profusely, and as we boarded the buses to return to Jerusalem, I wanted to cry.

Their work, of course, was a labor of love, and it showed. Not only did they persist in their hospitality and gardening in the midst of a scene out of a dystopian nightmare, they remained charitable in the face of the hostility of their neighbors. The courtyard of the original church was much larger originally, but a mosque had recently been built on top of it, so there was no way for us to visit the site of Lazarus’ tomb, the place where locals say Jesus raised his dear friend from the dead.

Our pilgrimage director explained the contrast we witnessed by saying, “The Muslims lack a sense of community. It is a case of every man for himself.” I had attributed the garbage I had seen in other Muslim neighborhoods to Islamic predestinarian fatalism, the insistence that whatever happens, good or bad, is God’s will. And I believe there is an element of that. But Amir’s explanation made much more sense; it crystalized the problem in a short retort. Because Islam does not honor as God the Man who said, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” Muslims don’t. They won’t so much as trouble themselves to drop a soda bottle in a garbage can or pick one up that someone else has dropped. Because they do not believe that God is love, they are woefully lacking in charity, unbothered by the filth that threatens to overwhelm them and their brethren.

As we rode out of Bethany, away from the oasis at the church, through the trash-strewn streets, I thought of Joey Ponce, Ron Margese, and Todd Glidewell. They aren’t related to me, so no one can say they did it because I’m their brother or dad. And they don’t have kids in our school, so they can’t be accused of just doing it for their family either. But almost every week those parishioners work to make the St. Joseph Church campus an oasis here in Providence. Ron cuts the grass, Todd sweeps the front, and Joey cleans the church, all for no pay and no recognition other than what I am giving them right now. They do it because their love for God requires, even demands, that they love you. And their love is expressed in such a simple way: they pick up the garbage. I wished I had thanked them a thousand times for something that seems so insignificant, yet which Bethany showed us makes all the difference in the world.

The love Jesus has shown us is a challenge to us. It’s not only about giving away what we possess so that the needy may have more. It’s also about doing what we don’t have to do out of affection for those we don’t even know, in the hope that our charity might lead them to get to know Jesus, who is God and who teaches us how to love.

If you want to see what happens to a place where faith in Jesus Christ is lost, go see the streets of Bethany in the West Bank. And if you want to see how faith in the only Son of God changes the physical environment in which we live, see the Church of St. Lazarus there; or you can spend more time here.