

2nd Sunday of Ordinary Time 2020

1-19-2020

MLK homily

“I will make you a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.” This quote from our first reading today from the Book of Isaiah is a basic prophecy about who the Son of Man, who John the Baptist refers to in today’s Gospel, is. Jesus, the Messiah, the light of the nations, who was baptized in water and whom the dove, representing the Holy Spirit, came down upon in the Jordan, that same Jesus is who we follow and why we call ourselves Catholic. This unifying proclamation of St. John the Baptist, recognizing in Jesus something greater, wasn’t seen as a threat, wasn’t seen as a power struggle, but to John, was righteousness and justice coming before him in the person of Jesus Christ.

Many times, in life, we struggle with power and having control in our lives, and in the way situations go. We want things to go in specific ways and when they don’t, we get upset. We want to control situations, because it tends to give us a sense of power and authority. In John’s witness today, he recognizes that the only authority that he has, comes from the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, not from himself. That his followers saw in him something different from all of the prophets that came before him, and followed after his teachings.

Despite having such power in the eyes of men, having all of these followers, he submitted to the will of God, and in the presence of Jesus testified to the Truth (capital “T” truth) that was present before him, for Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. It took humility, and right relationship with the Father to recognize and assent to the authority of the Son. In an act of justice, John allowed Jesus to take his rightful place as the Messiah, the Chosen one, the Son of God.

Justice, many times is a misunderstood concept to many. We think that if laws are enacted, that the just thing to do is to follow those laws. But at the same time, we in the 21st century struggle to assent to the fact that there are Objective truths that are always True no matter what. If there are no objective truths though, how can a law, any law truly be just? On whose authority do these “just” laws get made if only the powerful group that makes those laws has the ability to judge right from wrong? Who has the authority, outside of God, to objectively give us righteous laws that are to be followed at all times?

The Israelites in the desert, after the great Exodus were given laws, those 10 Commandments, that were written on tablets by God, and many times they, as we, struggled to and sometimes obstinately so, to follow those commands. In our world today, I have heard many times, that, “God’s rules are so outdated, why should I have to follow

them?” That is a very good question in a world today that tends to deny in the first place that God even exists! But to us Catholics, when we look to reason, when we look to logic, when we look to rationale, we look to what the Law, the Prophets, and the Son of Man laid out for us not just as a rule of life, but as a rule to strive for.

As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. stated in his letter from a Birmingham Jail, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.” There’s no such thing as private sin. One of the greatest injustices in our times today, was once called by Jim Wallis, “America’s original sin.” and that is the sin of racism. In a pastoral letter, “Brothers and Sisters to us” written in 1979 by the USCCB, the Catholic church stated that, “Racism is an evil which endures in our society and in our Church... We do not deny that changes have been made, that laws have been passed, that policies have been implemented. We do not deny that the ugly external features of racism which marred our society have in part been eliminated. But neither can it be denied that too often what has happened has only been a covering over, not a fundamental change. Today the sense of urgency has yielded to an apparent acceptance of the status quo. The climate crisis engendered by demonstrations, protests, and confrontation has given way to a mood

of indifference; and other issues occupy our attention.” It continues saying, “Our concern over racism follows, as well, from our strong commitment to evangelization. Pope St. John Paul II has defined evangelization as bringing consciences, both individual and social, into conformity with the Gospel. We would betray our commitment to evangelize ourselves and our society were we not to strongly voice our condemnation of attitudes and practices contrary to the Gospel.”

When we look at our world today, it would be easy for us to turn a blind eye to the world around us, and allow our blinders to keep us focused on merely what is in front of our faces. To focus on just what affects us and our local community only. As Catholics, though, who are a universal people (Catholic means universal), created in the image and likeness of God, our charge is much greater than to just, “go with the flow.” We are called to stand up for justice and stand against injustice. Because, as the document continues, “Racism is a sin: a sin that divides the human family, blots out the image of God among specific members of that family, and violates the fundamental human dignity of those called to be the children of the same Father. Racism is the sin that says some human beings are inherently superior and others essentially inferior just because of their race. It is a sin that makes racial characteristics the determining factor for the exercise of human rights. It mocks the words of Jesus, “Treat others the way you would have

them treat you.” Indeed, racism is more than a disregard for the words of Jesus; it is a denial of the truth of the dignity of each human being revealed by the mystery of the Incarnation.”

As Archbishop Coakley stated in a letter from 2017, “Racism is an attitude of mind and heart that rejects the fundamental equality of all human beings. This basic equality is rooted in our shared dignity as persons created in the image and likeness of God. God is the Creator and Father of us all. We are brothers and sisters.” So we are brothers and sisters in the Body of Christ.

As we look back this weekend, especially as we celebrate the life of Dr. King tomorrow, we must take a serious look at how we have taken his words from Birmingham and other letters and speeches to heart. When we look at his letters, he is challenging us to be the change that needs to happen in the world. He knew that if we didn’t pray, if we didn’t stand up to injustices, if we didn’t stick to our morals, that the world would continue to allow racism, and all manners of unspeakable injustices to creep into our society under our inattentive noses.

In a reflection on the 50th anniversary of the letters from Birmingham, Archbishop Kurtz, then the president of the USCCB spoke on the gravity of those letters. He stated, “Of course, sorrow for the

past and gratitude for the present will be empty words unless matched by a clear resolve to continue the work at hand. 50 years ago, Reverend King Jr. was cautioned not to do anything unwise or untimely. indeed, his actions and our actions this day not only reflect wisdom, both natural and supernatural, but also action whose time has long since come. Listen to the final words of his letter, "Let us all hope that the dark clouds of racial prejudice will soon pass away and the deep fog of misunderstanding will be lifted from our fear-drenched communities, and in some not too distant tomorrow the radiant stars of love and brotherhood will shine over our great nation with all the scintillating beauty."

And so, may we heed his wisdom, and that of the Word of God. May we look to God, who is the Father and Creator of all to bind our wounds, to cure our sickness of hate and prejudice, to quench our desire for control and power, and to be the Light of the nations that He promised us so many years ago through the prophet Isaiah.