

Homily Notes for Sunday, September 27, 2020 26th A

Readings: Ezekiel 18:25-28, Ps 25:4-14, Phil 2:1-11, Matt 21:28-32

1. Summary: Today's scripture passages warn us that it is our final decision for or against God, not our first, that determines our salvation or damnation. It is this which will decide our eternal reward or eternal punishment. We are not trapped by our past, personally nor by our family. God has graciously given us free will to choose our destiny. Our faithful response can have amazing results. Developing virtue (godly habits) in our lives makes this journey easier and our friendships more lasting. While virtue is not necessary for salvation, it makes it much more likely.

Reflections on the Readings:

2. In the first reading, the Lord God teaches that we must persevere to the end of our lives. It is not just a one-time commitment to Jesus that will save us.

“When someone virtuous turns away from virtue to commit iniquity, and dies, it is because of the iniquity he committed that he must die. But if he turns from the wickedness he has committed, he does what is right and just, he shall preserve his life; since he has turned away from all the sins that he has committed. He shall surely live, he shall not die.”

The good man who turns and does evil is lost and the evil man, who repents and does good, will live. We recognize this in our Eucharistic Liturgy.

3rd Eucharistic Prayer: To our departed brothers and sisters and to all who were pleasing to you at their passing from this life, give kind admittance to your kingdom.”

Note that Ezekiel is known as the prophet of individual responsibility. Note also that this change is not just a matter of belief but of actions (deeds). The people once asked an old rabbi, “When should we repent.” He answered, “The day before you die.” “But,” they said, we do not know the day of our death.” “Repent now,” he answered. Our only guarantee of dying in God's friendship is to live in that friendship always, saying “Yes,” to God in our deeds. At the time of our death, we must have “sanctifying grace” in our soul.

3. Today's responsorial psalm both remembers God's compassion and mercy.

4. In the second reading, Paul emphasizes Jesus's humility and his obedience to God's will. This passage represents why we bow our heads during the Creed in reverent appreciation for Jesus taking on human form.

The Gospel: What counts is the “last” decision.

5. In today's gospel, a man who has two sons tells both to go out to work in the vineyard. The first son says he won't go, but later regrets it and works. The second son says he will go but does not. In each case it is the final decision that is more important. Jesus teaches through this short parable that repentant tax-collectors and prostitutes, represented by the first son who initially refused to go, will make their way into the kingdom of God before the chief priests and the elders, represented by the second son in the parable. Because of their pride and their refusal to obey God's call to repentance, the Scribes and the Pharisees will exclude themselves, while the tax-collectors and sinners, whom they despised, will repent of their sins and will be accepted into God's kingdom. This parable also makes clear that words are not enough, deeds are required. The CCC makes this clear by its citations in #546 when speaking of the Proclamation of the Kingdom of God. See footnotes. Think of this every Thursday when you pray the Luminous Mysteries including the Preaching of the Kingdom of God.

“This story has applications in our time. The **second** son was not insincere: he probably intended to obey. That is often our case. Christianity appeals both to our reason and to our emotions. Worship kindles our dormant souls and we vow obedience. But **today** is too soon, and the discipline of trying to live our faith is too hard. So, though we have pledged our response to Christ, we do not **go** or we do not continue. On the other hand, the first son had been curt and rebellious, and chosen his own will. Who among us has not? But he **repented**. That fact means that he had meditated on life and faced the facts of conscience. It means also that he had laid aside his pride. Pride dies hard, but this son admitted his wrong without any attempt at excuse. Then he went. But he did his best, and God reckoned the attempt for the deed....

This story holds promise: we need not be slaves to an insolent past. It holds warning: even while professing Christ, we may become castaways.”

Virtue as a product of genuine repentance

6. This story with the first reading poses the issue of “virtue.” Note what “virtue” is. **Virtue is “a disposition to do the good with ease, promptitude and joy.”** Being virtuous is more than doing the right thing; it is the power to do the right thing with the right attitude, with ease and joy, with promptness and in a certain sense, pleasure. Were either of the sons in the Gospel reading “virtuous?” No, they were not. Why not? Neither were able to respond obediently to the Father with ease and joy. One promised and did not do. The other said “no” and then struggled to do what was right. Virtue is not necessary for salvation but makes it more likely.

7. We, as Catholic Christians, should be, first concerned about getting clear on what is morally correct, then repenting of our evil deeds, and then developing the strength of virtue. Note Acts 26:20 where St Paul preached:

“And so, King Agrippa,... “I preached the need to repent (to change one’s mind), and to turn to God (to change one’s behavior) and to do works giving evidence of repentance (present continuous tense, the result of which would be the formation of virtue [good habit]).

Virtue reverses the inclination toward evil, and by the strength of habit, inclines us toward the good.

Application to our lives and our relationships

8. This formation of virtue is very important in dating and courting relationships. Here I refer to “How to Find your Soulmate Without Losing Your Soul” by Jason and Crystalina Evert. Chastity is a virtue that is preparing us for happiness and stability in our marriages as well as eternal salvation. But chastity is not merely about restraint, but about preparing to make a total gift of yourself. Consider some of the things that chaste love requires: **sacrifice, patience, trust, and exclusivity** (p 138, Making love or mocking love). Are not these things that should be habits? The Greek philosopher Aristotle argued that “the goal of the virtues is to make us capable of being good friends.” Can a person who is dominated by “vice” (sinful habits) be a good friend?

9. How important is virtue to us as Christians? St Peter says,

“For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, virtue with knowledge, knowledge with self-control, self-control with endurance, endurance with devotion, devotion with mutual affection, mutual affection with love. If these are yours and increase in abundance, they will keep you from being idle or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Pet 1:5-7).

10. Life messages: (1) We need to do God’s will every day

The Reward of Virtuous Obedience

11. "Tell that woman that I want her here in the White House." Professor John Kenneth Galbraith, the world-famous Harvard economist and author of four dozen books and over a thousand articles, also served as economic advisor to four American presidents. In his autobiography, *A Life in Our Times*, Galbraith illustrates the devotion of Emily Gloria Wilson, his family's housekeeper: “It had been a wearying day, and I asked Emily to hold all telephone calls while I had a nap. Shortly thereafter the phone rang. President Lyndon Johnson was calling from the White House. "Get me Ken Galbraith. This is Lyndon Johnson." "He is sleeping, Mr. President. He has instructed me not to disturb him." "Well, wake him up. I want to talk to him." "No, Mr. President. I work for him, not you.” When I called the President back, he could scarcely control his pleasure. "Tell that woman that I want her here in the White House." Today’s gospel reminds us that perfect and virtuous obedience to God is more rewarding than reluctant obedience.

12 Application Questions:

- a. Tobias, 11 years old, is listening to Father Rex preaching at the children’s Mass. Father Rex starts his sermon by asking: **“What is the most important task of life?”** Then he pauses. Tobias guesses an answer: “To earn a lot of money honestly and buy a nice home for my father and mother.” Do you agree with Tobias? If so, tell why. If not, then give your answer to Father Rex’s question.
- b. Christina is asked by her Sunday School teacher, “If you hope to reach heaven, what must be in your soul when you leave this world?” Christina does not remember ever seeing that question in her Catechism. Answer it for her.