

Homily

October 1, 2023

26th Sunday in Ordinary Time

30:23 – 40:28

Have you ever made a statement, so sure of the statement, and then somebody asks you a question and you feel trapped? Has that ever happened to you?

In the First Reading and the Gospel today, there are statements and questions. In the Second Reading, it's another story. (We'll get to it later.)

The Prophet Ezekiel proclaims to the people in Babylon. They had been carried there because the Babylonians conquered and took them there. Later, the rest of the people of Jerusalem would be carried there, as well. "Ezekiel," whose name means "the strength of God," was with those exiles who were already there.

And throughout the book, which is over forty chapters long, he has magnificent visions – almost apocalyptic – but he also has two sections, where he first of all deals with the priests who were there and the leaders who had misled the people. He calls them bad shepherds and accuses them of taking care of themselves first and letting people do whatever they wanted to do, which brought about what happened.

But the second section, from which our reading comes, is his reflection through God's inspiration upon personal responsibility and accountability.

In the longest section, just prior to our reading, he lays out how you have said that everybody is responsible for everybody who comes later. If you do something wicked, generations - up to seven generations - are going to suffer from it. And if someone ahead of you did something wicked, you're suffering because of what they did. Ezekiel says, "No." You as an individual are responsible. You are accountable.

Thus, we heard of the fellow who was wicked and changed his mind and was saved. And the person who was just and decided to play around with wickedness, who was condemned. Nobody else is responsible for what they did and nobody else is accountable. They are.

Thus, the question: "Is it my ways that are unfair? Or your ways that are unfair?" That was a tough question centuries ago. It's still a question for us, as individuals and even as Church or nation.

Is it my ways that are unfair, or your ways that are unfair?

Our Gospel reading comes from Chapter 21 of Matthew's account. Now Matthew is the great proclaimer of the New Law and the New Moses to his Jewish-Christian community. Jesus is the New Moses. In Chapter 21, Jesus enters triumphantly into Jerusalem. He immediately then cleanses the Temple and from those two actions flow a number of controversies.

And then it gets interrupted by three parables. Our reading is the first parable. Jesus invites the religious leaders and the elder to a dialogue. At least it seems that's what it is because he asked the question, "What is your opinion?"

And he tells of the two sons. One who says no, but did yes. And one who said yes, but did no. And then he asked the question, "Which of the two sons did the Father's will?"

And by their response, "Well, the first one," they are convicted. They who have said, "Oh, yes. We will follow the Covenant. We will do everything that needs to be done. We will listen to your prophets." But for the person of Jesus, that's not true.

It's a tough question then. Isn't it? It's a tough question now. If we look at the two examples, which of the two did the Father's will? And where do we fall in that?

Now, there's no question in Philippians, but I would suggest there are questions that flow out of it. Philippians is a wonderful letter written to his beloved community of Philippi. He wrote it from prison. And he wrote it not only because he loved them, but he saw in them a powerful evidence of life in Christ.

In Chapter 2, from which our reading comes, he states very clearly that one is to follow in the footsteps of Christ, in how he lived out his mission. He uses that wonderful *kenotic* hymn. *Kenotic* is the Greek word for "emptying." ***He emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, and being found in human likeness.*** He followed the Father's will. He became obedient and followed the Father's will.

He charges the Philippians to consider this as a central focus for their lives. He already knows they're doing it. But here is the profound example **of Christ**.

And now the questions from that:

Are you selfish, ever? Do you always follow the Father's will?

Tough questions. Something we could ponder a long time, in general or specific. But I want to add another layer of question for us. This is throughout the United States “Respect Life Sunday,” leading to the whole month of October where we consider life as the preeminent value.

Here’s the question: Is our understanding of life and the issues of life that the Church teaches, that we should keep first and foremost in mind, and promote; is our approach to them about the Father’s will? Or about being selfish?

There are some who make the “self” first. And our culture, you know, puts Number One first. But many of the counter-teachings to what the Church teaches are laid out as, “Take care of yourself. Don’t worry about the other.”

So. Is your or my approach to these issues, first, about the preeminent value of life and the wonder of how God has revealed that in the teaching of the Church? Or is it first about the “I”?

That’s the end of the questions.

Now I would urge you and myself, to choose from among these many questions. Either from Ezekiel, Matthew’s Gospel account, or Philippians, and spend some time this week pondering and praying about them. And asking God to lead us through and toward a fuller response.