

3rd Sunday of Lent C- St. Thomas Aquinas

Introduction

Years ago, I served as the priest-secretary to Cardinal Hickey who was formerly the Archbishop of Washington. As a result, I often accompanied His Eminence to Rome. More often than not the Cardinal would be invited to concelebrate an early morning Mass in the private chapel of the Pope. Happily, that also meant that yours truly could accompany the Cardinal.

As we would be ushered into his chapel, the Pope was kneeling in prayer. He had been there for quite a long time before his guests arrived and it was clear, even to a casual observer, that his prayer was very deep. He seemed oblivious to the presence of anyone else and it was only when his priest-secretary tapped him on the shoulder that the future St. John Paul II realized it was time to celebrate Holy Mass.

The Burning Bush

I thought of this special memory of St. John Paul II as I listened to the story from the Book of Exodus about Moses and the burning bush. We read how Moses tended his father-in-law's flocks, leading them across the desert, just as Pope John Paul II tended the flock of God and lead us across through the desert of a godless secularism.

As Moses was tending the flock, he noticed a bush on fire. In itself, that was not a particularly surprising sight because bushes often caught fire in the hot desert sun. Moses noticed, however, that while the bush was on fire it wasn't being consumed by the fire...it just kept burning. Moses must have understood that he was seeing something miraculous, a phenomenon in which he would encounter God. For when God called Moses from the burning bush, Moses did not hesitate to answer, "Here I am!" As he removed his sandals and approached the bush, Moses encountered God.

So far as I know Pope John Paul II never encountered a burning bush but he was deeply conscious of the divine presence in the Redeemer as he knelt before the tabernacle, not only in his private chapel but indeed in any church or chapel where he prayed, including the small chapel in my residence in Baltimore. Just as Moses was drawn to the burning bush, so St. John Paul II was drawn to the real presence of Christ in the Sacrament reserved. It was there that this saintly Pope encountered God and heard God call his name. Every day of his life he responded, as did Moses, "Here I am!"

In his deep mystical prayer St. John Paul II derived the wisdom and pastoral love needed for his ministry. From his prayer that he obtained the strength to go forth and bring the Gospel to the ends of the earth. As we reflect on the burning bush and St. John Paul II's example of prayer, we might ask about our own life of prayer. Do we set aside time each day for prayer - not only the prayers we memorize - but also that prayer which comes from the heart - that prayer in which we listen to God and then respond in love? So many people imagine that a personal relationship with Christ is all but impossible. St. John Paul would say to us that it is not only possible but necessary. And he would tell us, "Be not afraid" to draw near to the presence of Christ, to seek him out in the tabernacles of our churches, so that we might say to the Lord, "Here I am!"

The Fig Tree

In the Gospel we listened to the story of the fig tree. Just as the burning bush was not merely a bush, so too the fig tree which Jesus observed was more than a fig tree. The fig tree and its fruit symbolized God's People and the faithfulness God expected from them. Thus, in the days of Jesus, fig trees were not only an important source of food but they were also a part of the religious life of the people of Israel. Not surprisingly, Jesus told a story, a parable, about a fig tree.

Jesus did provide a description of the tree's appearance. All we know about the fig tree is that, for three years, the owner of the vineyard kept checking it for fruit and found none. He was inclined to cut it down but the gardener urged him not to be so hasty. The gardener pleaded for time so he could cultivate the soil around the tree to see if this barren tree might be coaxed into bearing some good fruit. In listening to

Jesus' parable about the barren fig tree, I am reminded of what a wonderful pastor of souls St. John Paul II was... how much good fruit his ministry brought forth in himself and others. From the beginning of his priesthood, he guided so many young people to a life of prayer and discipleship. As a priest and bishop in Poland when it was under Communist oppression, the future Pope helped many to experience the freedom and joy of knowing and loving Christ, of finding their dignity in him, and living lives that bore the good fruit of charity and holiness. When he became Pope in 1978, the Pope started to do this on a global scale. Think about the World Youth Days that he started. How many young people who were otherwise indifferent to Christ and the Church became committed Catholic Christians, many entering religious life or the priesthood, many others becoming dedicated spouses, living the sacrament of marriage faithfully. He was like a skillful gardener that brought forth in us the fruit of the Gospel.

As we conclude our pilgrimage at this beautiful Shrine, let us ask if we ourselves are bearing the good fruit of the Gospel. For us, as the family of the Knights of Columbus, this means living to the hilt the Gospel principles on which the Order was founded: charity - loving God and giving of ourselves to those in need; unity - oneness with God, oneness with fellow knights, a force for unity in the Church and in our fragmented world; fraternity - looking out for fellow knights and their families and bringing to our daily activity a sense of solidarity with those around us; and patriotism - a genuine love of country which prompts us to help make it a civilization of truth and love, even in spite of the challenges all around us. This is the good fruit which the Lord Jesus calls us to produce; Father McGivney, St. John Paul II and many others are praying for us so that our lives might be laden with the good fruit of the Kingdom of God.

Conclusion

Let's conclude by bringing together the burning bush and the barren tree. Pope John Paul II's life was extraordinarily fruitful because he prayed. Because he encountered God daily he bore the good fruit of the Gospel. The same is true for us - to the extent that we pray each day - to the extent that we open our hearts to the Lord and strive for holiness - to that extent will our lives bear the good fruit of the Gospel was well.

During Lent let us invite the gardener, who is Jesus, to cultivate the soil of our souls, to enrich it with his Word, to water it with his mercy, to fertilize it with love, so that when Easter comes we may be found not barren but fruitful. Vivat Jesus!