

Archbishop Lori's Homily - On the Recent Pastoral Letter and Racism; 1st Sunday of Lent

1st Sunday of Lent

St. Bernardine's Parish

Baltimore, MD

Feb. 18, 2018

I am delighted to return to St. Bernardine's to celebrate Sunday Mass on this First Sunday of Lent, the beginning of a penitential season focused on those who will be baptized and received into the Church at Easter, focused on the purification and enlightenment of the hearts of all the baptized.

Before offering my message this morning, I would like to join with all of you in expressing our mutual thanks to your pastor, Monsignor Bozzelli, for his wonderful leadership and devoted pastoral care! And let us remember as well the soul of Msgr. Ed Miller who left an indelible mark on all of us, on this parish, on the Archdiocese as well as the wider community. May his great soul rest in peace!

I also want to thank you, the parish family of St. Bernardine. You are "a light brightly visible" here on Edmundson Avenue in the heart of Baltimore. I deeply appreciate the vibrancy of your parish community, especially your witness to the faith through works of charity and mercy. May the golden dome of St. Bernardine's bear witness for years to come to the beauty and goodness of this community of faith, worship, and service!

As you may have heard, last week I offered a pastoral letter to the people of the Archdiocese of Baltimore and to the wider community. Its focus is on the Principles of Nonviolent Direct Action of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in resisting and overcoming racism and in creating a more just and inclusive society. How fitting that we listen to the prophetic voice of Dr. King at this moment of our history as a community and as a nation. What better way to commemorate the 50th anniversary of

Dr. King's assassination than to open our hearts to his prophetic teaching. His teaching helps us grow in our understanding of Scripture, including today's Gospel reading in which Jesus was tempted by the devil. Let us ask what the temptations Christ suffered might have to do with us and with state of our world, and our nation, and our local community. And let me begin with this observation: The way the devil went about tempting Jesus may seem a little unusual to us. When we're hungry, not many of us think of turning stones into bread. When we're tempted to doubt God, please God none of us would entertain the thought of plunging from a steeple. And while some people in this world might be tempted to world-wide domination, most of us try to have a realistic appraisal of our influence and power. And so one might conclude that these temptations were specific only to Jesus. They seem too grandiose, too high-flying, to be aimed at ordinary people... but let us look again.

The outer form of these temptations may be overly grand but the core the temptations that Jesus suffered are all too common: the temptation to satisfy one's appetites for money, luxury, and comfort; the temptation to doubt God and to substitute ourselves in place of God; the temptation to exercise unjust power and domination over other people. In ways big and small, every person is tempted in these three ways.

These temptations also go to the heart of racism. One of the ways racism manifests itself in our culture is economic inequality. A handful of people possess vast amounts of wealth—too much of this world's 'bread'. Other people, while not wealthy, have more than they need. But so many other people in this world lack food, clothing, shelter, medical care, the opportunity for a decent education and gainful employment. Some, in fact, are desperately poor and underprivileged. Often it is racial minorities who are the victims of economic and social injustice and the evidence is painfully clear in many of this city's neighborhoods. Meanwhile, far too many people choose to be indifferent about these problems even while harboring in their hearts racial stereotypes. In effect, they blame the victims while they themselves live in relative comfort.

The Word of God breaks into this unjust situation as Jesus says to the devil: "One does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes forth from the mouth of God!" Dr. King broke open that Word as he spoke to a people living in a society

saturated with racism and inequality. He pointed out to them a non-violent path, a path for a courageous people, a path that seeks friendship and understanding, seeks to proclaim human dignity and solidarity, seeks to open minds and hearts to the humanity of their neighbors and thus to break down the walls of indifference. In the same vein, Dr. King taught us to work for the defeat of injustice, not only to resist injustice but to overcome it by persuasion, by galvanizing others into action, by creating conditions where a critical mass of people come to the conclusion that such injustice can no longer stand.

A second attitude that enables racism and injustice to grip our culture is despair and its first cousins, doubt, distrust, pessimism and cynicism. These are the attitudes that the devil tried to lead Jesus into when he urged him to jump off the parapet of the temple to see if God would send his angels to catch him! The devil wanted to get Jesus to doubt God, to despair of his love and justice. How often we are confronted with a negative narrative about our community, a narrative of hopelessness, a narrative that says things will never improve, a narrative that puts no faith either in God or in the people who are our neighbors and our brothers and sisters. Sometimes we are tempted to buy into this narrative yet today we hear Jesus say, "You shall not put the Lord your God to the test." Dr. King breaks open what Jesus says to us when he teaches us to believe that ultimately justice will triumph. In saying this, he offers us, not sunny optimism, but genuine Christian hope, a bedrock trust in God that convinces us that injustice, violence, and death are not the last word about our lives or about the life of our community. Hope, trust in God, does not wane when things seem dire and does not give up on God or on other people or their communities. Dr. King teaches us to be realists, not pessimists!

And finally, racism manifests itself when some people decide that they, not God, are the masters of the human family. Racial supremacy, in whatever form it takes, is the substitution of one's own personal power for God's power. In place of the God who created each of us in his image and likeness, the supremacist declares that some in the human family are less than human, that some are less worthy of respect and opportunity, that some are destined to be suppressed and oppressed, while others are privileged. Sadly, such views still exist in our culture, as we've all seen.

To those who harbor attitudes of supremacy, the One who is truly Supreme, says:

“The Lord, your God, shall you worship and him alone will you serve.” And Dr. King breaks open these words of Jesus when he tells us that nonviolence chooses love instead of hate. As Dr. King said, “At the center of nonviolence stands the principle of love.” Love even for those who persecute and perpetuate injustice is possible because we believe God has loved us first and that his love is more powerful than the sum of human wickedness. We believe in the end, God’s love and justice will triumph – will overcome evil with goodness and hatred with love. This is where we get the strength to stand up in the face of injustice and say, “We shall overcome someday!”

Years ago, the Second Vatican Council taught that “the future of humanity lies in the hands of those who are strong enough to provide coming generations with reason for living and hoping.” Let St. Bernardine’s be always be that community of faith strong enough, faithful enough, loving enough to give each new generation reason for living and hoping and loving!

God bless you and keep you always in his love!