

Archbishop Lori's Homily: 3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time; Our Lady of Grace

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Our Lady of Grace, Parkton

Jan. 27, 2019

Introduction: A Sermon Walking

City officials and reporters are gathered at a Chicago railway station to await the arrival of the 1952 Nobel Peace Prize winner. At the appointed hour, the honoree steps off the train, a big man, six-feet-four, with bushy hair and a prominent mustache. As cameras flash, city dignitaries welcome him effusively. He thanks them . . . but looking over their heads, asks if he could be excused. Making his way through the crowd, he heads towards an elderly African-American woman struggling to board a train while carrying two large suitcases. The honoree smiles, helps her with her bags, and wishes her a safe journey. Turning to the crowd tagging along behind, he says, "Sorry to keep you waiting."

That man was Dr. Albert Schweitzer, the famed pastor, author, and missionary doctor who spent much of his long life serving the poor in Africa, most notably running at his own expense a leprosarium at Lambaréné. To one of the reporters, a star-struck member of Chicago reception committee said of Dr. Schweitzer, "You know, that's the first time I ever saw a sermon walking."

Jesus, The Word Made Flesh

All the more could we say the same of Jesus: he was "a sermon walking". In today's Gospel, we find Jesus preaching in his hometown synagogue at Nazareth. Just as the prophet Ezra had proclaimed God's Word some 400 years earlier, proclaiming a time of repentance, redemption and jubilee, so now Jesus is handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah from which he reads. Standing before the congregation as the

Messiah, anointed by the Holy Spirit, Jesus proclaims 'glad tidings to the poor, liberty to captives, sight to the blind, freedom for the oppressed, a time of favor from the Lord.' With the eyes of all in the synagogue fixed on him, he adds, simply, "Today this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing."

Jesus did not merely bring a prophetic message from God. Rather, he was the long-awaited Messiah, the one whom the Prophets foretold. He was and is the only-begotten Son of the Father, the Word made flesh, the Word of God incarnate in our humanity by the power of the Holy Spirit, and sent into the world to proclaim the Good News of our salvation. He was sent to proclaim a new season of mercy and joy, a time of repentance, redemption, and jubilee... and that is precisely what Jesus did.

In the Acts of the Apostles, St. Luke says of Jesus: "You know...how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with His Holy Spirit and power. He went about doing good and healing all those oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him" (AA, 10:38) To the poor - that is, to the impoverished, the despised, and the humble, Jesus brought the glad tidings of God's redeeming truth and love - Not only did Jesus point out the path to happiness, but he himself is that path! To those held captive by sin and oppression, he brought liberty. Jesus came not merely to make people feel better about themselves. No, his Person, anointed by the Spirit, is the very source of forgiveness and peace. To those who were blind, physically and spiritually, he restored their sight - and more than that, Jesus is himself the light of world.

So, when the disciples of John the Baptist asked Jesus if He were the One who is come, Jesus replied, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the good news preached to them" (Mt. 11:4-5). Jesus was indeed the walking sermon, par excellence!

Travelling Messengers for Christ

Believe it or not, dear friends, you and I are also called to be "a walking sermon". Or, as the Second Vatican Council put it, we are to be "traveling messengers of Christ." Now, the Council's words, "travelling messengers of Christ", were not directed only to members of the clergy, or to our heroic missionaries in far-flung lands, but rather to you, as members of the laity, as baptized members of the Body of

Christ. Time and again, St. John Paul II called upon the lay persons and families to bring the joy and truth of the Gospel into the world – to contribute to the sanctification of the world, by living as Jesus’ disciples, by bearing witness to the Gospel, often in quiet ways that impact the lives of others, but sometimes in dramatic ways that amaze even our jaded world. And, as we speak, Pope Francis is meeting with young people in Panama, challenging them to encounter the Lord, to be his followers, and to bear him witness in the ordinary circumstances of their lives.

Or, to put it another way, once our eyes are fixed on Jesus, and once our hearts have been won over to his truth and love, then we will want to take the Lord with us wherever we go. Whether we are at home or work, with our friends, classmates, or colleagues, the message of Christ will shine through what we say, what we do, the kinds of decisions we make, our readiness to forgive, our personal generosity, our willingness to go out of our way for others. This is how we answer the call to be “walking sermons”, to be Christ’s “travelling companions”.

And we may object that no one of us is Albert Schweitzer and certainly none of us is the Word made flesh, and you may also want to say to me, “Haven’t you noticed that these are difficult times in the Church’s life?” “Don’t you realize that there will be opposition, maybe even derision?” Yes, I do, and I humbly acknowledge that many bad decisions have complicated the mission given us to spread the Gospel of Jesus in the world. But here’s what St. Paul teaches us today in our second reading. He teaches that we are members of the Body of Christ. That doesn’t simply mean that we are part of a group, that belonging to the Church is like belonging to any other voluntary organization. No, what it means is that Christ lives in each of us through Baptism. Elsewhere St. Paul says, “It is not I who live but Christ who lives in me!” He will also say that through Baptism we are joined, physically and sacramentally, to the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ, crucified and risen. And in the Eucharist, it is the Body of Christ and his Blood outpoured that we share. No, we are here, not merely as members of a group but rather, it is because Christ lives in each of us that we form a community of faith, that we are individually members of the Church, the Body of Christ.

What’s more, the Holy Spirit pours out upon us the gifts that are needed to make Jesus’ presence impactful in this world of ours – gifts that differ – but gifts that work

together for a united and loving proclamation of the Gospel, gifts that are given to us by the Holy Spirit for the common good, especially gifts of proclaiming the truth prophetically, teaching it wisely and lovingly, and in God's grace, translating it into charity, a charity that evangelizes. Thus, no one of us should think that it is beyond us, that it is out of the question that we ourselves can be those "walking sermons" – those travelling messengers of Christ that the world needs so desperately.

Conclusion

In the rough and tumble of daily living, we may easily overlook the countless opportunities given us to bear witness to the Gospel. It might be reaching out to a friend who is ill, renewing a lost friendship, serving a homeless person, feeding the hungry, helping a fellow student or a colleague, working for just causes, or doing what is right in such a wise and loving way that others are influenced. Going to Mass on Sunday or weekdays says more than we think it does. Making good moral choices in one's professional life and in one's social life – all this conspires to create that "critical difference" that attracts others to Jesus.

Overshadowed by the Spirit, joined to one another in the Body of Christ, secure in our human and Christian identity, may we have the courage to bring glad tidings to the poor, liberty to captives, sight to the blind, release to prisoners, and to celebrate a year of favor from the Lord. Then, because of us, everyone will have their eyes fixed on Jesus.