

St. Patrick's Parade Homily

News from Home

Years ago, as a young priest, I accompanied my boss and mentor, Cardinal Hickey, to a Friendly Sons of St. Patrick Dinner in downtown Washington. For those of you who have never been to these dinners, let me say that the spirits of every one there are high, or perhaps I might say that everyone there is high on spirits.

As you can imagine, it is a tough audience to address. So at this particular dinner, the Irish Minister of Agriculture was scheduled to speak. Apparently he didn't get the memo about keeping his message light and brief. No, he launched into a detailed speech about grain production in Ireland, of all things. Well, those who had tasted abundantly of the fruits of malted barley and wheat, viz., beer, ... they were in no mood to hear about grain production in Ireland.

With Peter, James, and John on the Mountain

Well, it's not just audiences at Friendly Sons of St. Patrick dinners that find it hard to listen; we all do! Husbands and wives, co-workers, and friends often do not listen to each other. And often, all of us fail to listen to the Word of God in our daily lives.

With all of that said, let's now ascend the mountain with Peter, James, and John. Here the glory of the Lord Jesus is revealed, the glory he shared with God the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit from before the foundation of the world, from all eternity. Scripture describes the breathtaking scene: Jesus becomes dazzling like the sun; Moses and Elijah confirm that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets. The voice of the Father is heard, "This is my beloved Son, listen to him!"

In that moment, prior to the crucifixion, when the glory of Jesus was revealed, God the Father did not issue a detailed set of instructions and commands. No, to Jesus' three closest followers, the Father gave only one command: "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased, listen to him!"

But here we might object: Were not the disciples already listening to Jesus? Had they not heard the Sermon on the Mount? Weren't they there when Jesus proposed parables and then explained them? The answer is "yes" - but they listened

selectively. The disciples tuned out what they didn't want to hear, especially when Jesus foretold his death for the forgiveness of sins and told them they would have to imitate his sacrificial love.

Down from the Mountain

Now, let's come down from the Mountain and inquire about our own lives. It is so easy for us to listen selectively, whether we are at home or at work. How readily we interrupt others when they speak to us. How quickly we shift the focus of conversation away from others & towards ourselves. And how subtly we tune out what we really don't want to hear or have to deal with. Here, all of us, myself included, should examine our consciences.

But if we have a hard time listening to one another, we shouldn't imagine we find it easy to listen to God's Word. Often we don't even give God the chance to speak to us, when we crowd him out of our daily lives, or never open the Scriptures, or miss Mass on Sunday, shut out teachings we don't like, ignore the poor, or stop examining our consciences in the light of the Ten Commandments. This is how we fail to listen to the beloved Son when his heart tries to speak to ours.

A Word from St. Patrick and Pope Francis At this point, friends, let's call in reinforcements, in the person of St. Patrick. Once a slave in Ireland, St. Patrick returned there to preach the Gospel. Indeed, he spent most of his life and energy trying to win a hearing for the Gospel in a pagan culture. He must have been a very engaging speaker and a clever catechist. Like Pope Francis, he had a knack for explaining the faith with images and comparisons that made the faith accessible. But he was more than a clever salesperson. St. Patrick was a man of great holiness. By study and prayer, by reading Scripture, and by penitence, St. Patrick truly opened his heart to the Father's beloved Son. He obeyed the Father's command, "This is my beloved Son, listen to him."

Centuries later we sing hymns to the glory of St. Patrick: "Hail, glorious St. Patrick, dear saint of our isle..." and ... "Hail, glorious St. Patrick, thy words were once strong..." What really was the glory of St. Patrick? It wasn't a mere external glory for St. Patrick led the rugged life of a missionary. St. Patrick's glory shone from within his soul. He had listened to the voice of the Father's beloved Son and now his

witness to Jesus shone with truth and love of God's own glory. As a result, St. Patrick not only won converts to the faith, he laid the foundations for a truly Catholic culture.

We are seeing something similar in the ministry of Pope Francis. He has won a fresh hearing for the Catholic faith in our secular culture not by acting imitating the techniques of celebrities but by a life of Gospel simplicity, by listening to God's Word in prayer, by pastoral love, and by preaching in a way that is both challenging and accessible. And he is urging us all, in our various vocations, to listen carefully to the Word of God, to let it shape our lives, & then to bring the Good News of the Father's beloved Son to others, to the margins, to those who have stopped practicing their faith, to the poor, the sick, the oppressed. Along the way, he is urging us, even chiding us, to listen to God & to one another.

The Upshot for Us

Let me now recall something I said earlier in this homily. I said that the Apostles listened to Jesus but they listened selectively. They tuned out what they did not want to hear. I want to mention that again because we won't be able to imitate St. Patrick nor will we follow through with what Pope Francis is urging us to do, so long as we listen to the Word of God selectively. So a primary goal of ours in Lent should be this: to move from being *selective* listeners to becoming *attentive* listeners to God's Word, beginning with the most fundamental truth of the Christian faith: "Jesus Christ loves you; he gave his life to save you; & now he is living at your side every day to enlighten, strengthen, and free you" (EG, 164). Once that message hits home then our hearts are open to the Scriptures, to the Mass & Sacraments, to the Church's teaching, to building up a life of prayer. Once that message hits home we begin to bear witness to Lord & to the Church before the world, including family, friends, & co-workers.

And just as St. Patrick listened to the voice of the beloved Son and laid the foundations for a truly Christian culture, so too, when we listen attentively to the voice of the beloved Son, we become the Lord's instruments in allowing the truths and values of our faith to help shape the culture in which we live, building what successive Popes have called "a civilization of truth and love."

Through today's Gospel and through the example of St. Patrick & Pope Francis, we have truly found 'the glory of these forty days' of Lent: that glory can be found in listening to the voice of the Father's beloved Son. May God bless us and keep us always in His love!