

The Twenty-fifth Sunday of the Year, A -- September 18, 2011

Beginning with chapter 18 of St. Matthew's Gospel, Jesus begins teaching about the Kingdom and giving us guidance in how to live as a member of it. So we have heard about the importance of fraternal correction. We've heard about how we are called to forgive, and today God shows us that His ways are not our ways by demonstrating His infinite generosity in the parable of the workers in the vineyard. Today, however, I want to focus on the message in our second reading from St. Paul's letter to the Christians in Philippi.

Back in my seminary days, there was a priest on the seminary staff who was in charge of spiritual direction in the house. We seminarians liked him, but we would also sort of non-maliciously make fun of him. For he had, it seemed to us, the rather minor fault of being overly dramatic. But then, he was an Irishman, and a Jesuit, so; what can you expect? However, on occasion while he was preaching, we knew that if he leaned forward in the pulpit and took off his reading glasses and begin to twirl them in his right hand – we knew then that we'd best listen, stop daydreaming (something I am sure is never done here at Sacred Heart during the homily!), because those were the signs that he was about to say something important. I will never forget what he said one time on just such an occasion: he declared to us that really we as priests, as preachers, would find out that we really, each one of us individually, have only one homily to preach, one perspective on the Gospel that would bore into our souls and then would be preached over and over again in different ways. Now, at first I was inclined to just dismiss this, but Father was leaning forward in the pulpit and he was twirling his glasses.

And Father was right in a sense. If I have one homily, if I have one thing to try to communicate to the faithful, it is what St. Paul is saying in today's second reading: "Christ will be exalted through me, whether I live or die. For, to me, 'life' means Christ; hence dying is so much gain.... I long," he went on to say, "to be freed from this life and to be with Christ, for that is a far better thing...." These are strange words to the modern ear. For people, for many Catholics, in our day this life in Christ, this departing from this world, these mysterious words about heaven – we only hold now in our belief system as a kind of afterthought, something one has recourse to when someone you love dies or when one has to face concretely his own death. Like a computer doing a word search, when we need heaven, the solace of the thought of an afterlife, people extract it from their collection of religious beliefs and put it to good use.

Well, how different is the attitude of Paul! For that matter, how different is the attitude of Jesus, who spoke often about things of eternity, and warned us pointedly, a warning very pertinent to our own materialistic age, that where is the profit if someone gain the whole world and yet lose the very thing that has everlasting value – one's soul? Or, when our Lord said, "Life is not in the things you possess." It is just not there. Not even in this so-called possession of ours of time, a rather short span of time in the big scheme of things, upon this earth. "Life," St. Paul is admonishing us, "means Christ." And by that the Apostle means that only in Christ is there a sharing in that for which we deep-down most long and yearn: eternal life.

Of course we still adhere to this, but we have in modern times reduced this to the category of something that only is to be reckoned with

at the end of one's life on this earth. No, St. Paul is saying, "Life means Christ." Yesterday, today, and forever.

Here is what I mean, what I am getting at. The Catholic Church, ever since her inception, has refused to buy into these schemes that come and go with such monotony and the facade of novelty, these ideas, on the one hand, that are summed up in the saying, "Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow you die." Well, Catholicism, being eminently realistic and knowing the human heart so thoroughly, says in response: Yes, we may eat and drink, eat and drink a lot and do a lot of other things to try to ease the pain of soul, to try to evade the nagging fact that each day we grow older and move ever closer to our end in this world – we may eat and drink, that is, but we will not really be merry, knowing that tomorrow we die.

And on the other hand, the Church rejects the notion that this life on earth is inconsequential, that eternity is everything and time is nothing, heaven is all and earth irrelevant. No, St. Paul exhorts us: "I am," he wrote in regards to time and eternity, earth and heaven, "strongly attracted by both."

And again, the key to seeing the uniquely Christian view of existence is, of course, our Lord Himself, Christ. He is our life, because in him, in his very person, are united time and eternity, earth and heaven, human and divine. Every week we attest to this reality when we recite the Nicene Creed. "We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, one in Being with the Father. Through him all things were made. For us men and for our salvation he came down

from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit he was born of the Virgin Mary, and became man." These are some of most significant words ever written, that this One who is God, true God from true God, that this One "became man." "The Word was made flesh," St. John tells us, the Word, the eternal and blissful self-expression of God the Father, who is the Son, this divine Person took human flesh and came amongst us.

And so the great chasm between time and eternity, between God and humanity, is closed; brought together in unity and harmony in Christ. Time is no longer, for the Christian, the enemy, the thing we war against, the thing we frantically try to evade, out-maneuver, to vainly try to stop so that we don't grow old and die. It is just so much foolishness. Time marches on, but time now has become, not the enemy, but the means, the avenue, toward eternity, a road traveled by God Himself in Jesus Christ.

Eternity is no longer some far off, remote, cold and forgotten place; for the eternal Word, the eternal Son of the Father, has lived among us, sanctifying our life on this earth; and He died among us, paving the way for us to everlasting life through his resurrection from the dead.

And so only the Christian gospel brings this to light, the unity of heaven and earth. Only the gospel explains to us that eternity and time are not disconnected. Rather eternity, now, today, in your heart and mine, informs, gives meaning to our life upon this earth. So that whether we suffer or prosper, go through sorrow or joy (and we all have differing degrees of both), we know, we really know, what life is all about. "Life means Christ." And so we Christians, we do eat and drink and are merry, not because tomorrow we die, but because tomorrow we live.