

HOMILY for 31st SUNDAY in ORDINARY TIME – Year B

Jesus in this Sunday's Gospel told a man who believed that following the Commandment of love is worth more than all the burnt offering & sacrifices is not far from Heaven. Reflecting on that, I'm reminded of this cute story that I'd like to share with you.

One day, in a Religious Education Class, a Sunday school teacher asked, "Now, how many of you want to go to Heaven?" All the children raised their hands except one little girl.

"I'm sorry, I can't. My Mommy told me to come right home after Sunday school!"

Anyhow, if there is one place everyone, especially Christians, would like to end up after this earthly life, it would be Heaven or the Kingdom of God. None of us would want to be condemned to a fiery & painful place called "Hell." Unfortunately we have not heard enough about Heaven or the Kingdom of God in churches & writings. The Church, like the rest of the world, has been busy talking about politics & worldly things. To help us re-focus our spiritual life on the right goal, Jesus in this Sunday's Gospel wants to talk to us about the Kingdom of God or Heaven. Here is what the Gospel reports, "...Jesus approved the insight of this answer & told him, 'You are not far from the Kingdom of God.'" Evidently a person gave Jesus the right answer about the top Commandments & was told that he was on the right path to the Kingdom of God. As you can see, the one & only focus that Jesus had in mind at all times is the Kingdom of God or Heaven. So, what was the answer that had made Jesus say that this person is on the right path to the Kingdom of God?

We were told that one of the scribes wanted to find out which is the first of all the Commandments. Jesus told him to love God with all his heart & soul & to love his neighbors as himself. This scribe agreed with Jesus' answer & responded, "Excellent, Teacher! You are right in saying, 'He is the One; there is no other than he.' Yes, 'to love Him with all our thoughts & with all our strength, & to love our neighbor as ourselves' is worth more than any burnt offering or sacrifice." This religious leader evidently knew how important a burnt offering or sacrifice was in the Jewish Tradition. We have heard how Abraham was able to sacrifice a goat in place of his only son to appease his God. We have also learned that Moses was caught by surprise to see his people create a new god in the form of a golden calf & make a burnt offering to it. The Jews often relied on religious priests to make sacrifices to God on their behalf & offered the first fruits of their labor or harvest as a token of their thanksgiving. So, in this Sunday's Gospel, the religious leader told Jesus that a faithful person who lives a life of love – loving God & neighbors makes a better offering or sacrifice than anything else on earth. For someone could go to a Jewish Temple & make regular offerings to God & still hates one's neighbors or has one's heart far away from God. That is why Jesus challenged all Jews to live a sincere spiritual life with the parable of the Good Samaritan. That is why Jesus' ultimate sacrifice on the Cross on our behalf is the best offering to God. His love for neighbors is indeed sincere & personal on the Cross. That is why we'll be on the right path to the Kingdom of God or Heaven if we truly follow a life of love – loving God & our neighbors.

We Christians might have our spiritual focus on Heaven & loving God & our neighbors. But, the Jews were pre-occupied with the Promised Land & loving God only. Their passion was expressed in this Sunday's First Reading as following, "Moses told the people: Fear the Lord, your God; & keep, throughout the days of your lives, all His statutes & Commandments which I enjoin on you, & thus have a long life. Hear then, Israel, & be careful to observe them, that you

may grow & prosper the more, in keeping with the promise of the Lord, the God of your fathers, to give you a land flowing with milk & honey.” So, Moses apparently advised & called on the Israelites/the people of God to keep God’s Commandments & statutes if they would want to inherit the Promised Land flowing with milk & honey & be blessed with a long & prosperous life. I’m sure you have heard about the prosperity Gospel which some TV Evangelists & ministers have preached to their faithful congregations. Basically these preachers believe & tell their people that if they are rich, it is because God has blessed them. Hence, they have encouraged their people to get rich in this world at all costs, including neglecting a good spiritual life & making sacrifices for the eternal life. We probably wonder where they have got such an idea of the prosperity Gospel. This Sunday’s First Reading is one of the places in the Bible where they would cite & base their idea of the prosperity Gospel on. Anyhow, if we keep God’s Commandments, we’ll be rewarded with the eternal life in Heaven or the Promised Land & also a long & prosperous life.

The Israelites could not wait to get to the Promised Land after years of slavery & exile in foreign lands. While waiting for that new world & working hard to get there, they dreamt & thought about it day & night. They were told that dream land would be flowing with milk & honey. Clearly that place is full of life & abundant harvests, totally different from the lifeless & forsaken desert that they had wandered around for years. If the Israelites needed to dream & think about the Promised Land day & night, shouldn’t we do the same with the Kingdom of God or Heaven? I feel that we should. Like the Israelites, many of us have dreamt about the USA as a land of freedom & wonderful opportunities. If we did not do that, we would not want to risk our lives & come here. So, I encourage all of us to dream & think about the Kingdom of God or Heaven day & night. In Heaven, we will have true peace & happiness instead of all the violence & suffering of the current life. We will enjoy a life free of worries & injustice of this world. Jesus also lets us know that our new life in Heaven is like attending a huge banquet or a festival with people that we love & adore. Isn’t that a wonderful place for us to have a reunion & make it our permanent home?

My dear brothers & sisters, we all want to make it to the Kingdom of God or Heaven to enjoy the Heavenly Banquet & blessings of the eternal life. This Sunday’s Gospel is one of the rare occasions where Jesus has revealed to us on how we can get there, by following the Commandments of loving God & our neighbors. The Israelites had to do the same to help them get to Promised Land by keeping all the required statutes & Commandments. I believe that the Heavenly rewards are worth all the sacrifices that we will have to make in this life. I call on all of us to make this life-time bet & investment because it is worth every ounce of our effort. As we prepare & wait for that new land, we need to dream & think about it day & night. For Jesus once said, “Where your treasure is, your heart will be.”