

LIVING THE JOY OF OUR FAITH

The first reading and the Gospel for this Sunday are tied together in the message that the final days are very near. The prophet Malachi, centuries before Christ, is telling the people to be prepared but that at the end it will be the Son of Justice will heal all wrongs and all people. In the Gospel, Christ tells the people that the day will come when the Temple will be no more, crushed to the ground. To the Jewish people this was the end of the world. And in fact, it was some thirty or forty years later when the Romans literally left no stone standing as they utterly crushed the Temple and the Jewish nation. But Christ was also referring to the last days telling the people that all those who believe in him will face very hard times and will be handed over to the rabble to be done away with. But Jesus does leave a hint of hope, saying that if they persevered they would be saved.

After Christ rose from the dead and then ascended into heaven, sending the Holy Spirit upon his followers, the church began to grow in an astounding way, bringing not just hundreds but thousands of converts into the fold. In a very short period this crowd of believers began to weld into some sort of order as a Church, as a group of believers with the Apostles as their leaders. And then Paul came into the scene, having been called in a very special way by Christ himself to be an Apostle to the Gentiles. And just as the Apostles were trained by Christ so was Paul. He mentions in one of his letters that he spent some time in the "desert" where he had some mystical experiences. Then later he mentions that he went to Jerusalem to meet with The Rock (Peter) and James and John to tell them what he was preaching, and they agreed that they were all on the same page.

All this leads us to the second reading taken from Paul's letter to the Thessalonians. In this letter he tells them not to think that the final days are coming in their lifetime, but rather to go on living as he had taught them. This part of his letter is not given this Sunday. Rather we read how Paul goes into a long discussion of how he has acted with them. It is a discussion but it certainly sounds very much like he is bragging! But that is not at all his purpose. Rather he explains that he wanted to be a model for them as to how a true Christian should act. In no way was he indicating that he was far better than of them; rather he was trying very hard to show them that true Christianity is not just a set of beliefs but rather a way of life. He was to be a living example of everything Christ taught his disciples. He was giving them a living example of being a follower of Christ, and he wanted them to imitate his way of living.

One could imagine that we are all to become imitations of Paul. The word imitation can have a good and a bad meaning. It can be taken as meaning something like the real but inferior, such as imitation pearls, imitation leather, etc. The list can be long and everyone is very familiar with this meaning. But can also have a very positive meaning, such as one trying to emulate a fine writer, a great musician, etc. There is that old saying that imitation is the most sincere form of flattery. It is in this sense that Paul is urging the Thessalonians to imitate him as he strives to imitate Christ. Paul did exactly this to the very best of his ability. He understood perfectly the power of example.

The world we live in today is a very materialistic and hedonistic society, and the powers of modern technology, especially all the constant advances in communications and cyberspace have done in some ways more harm than good. There are always those who will misuse God's gifts for their

own ends. Through all this the Church Christ founded always strives to keep abreast but often lags behind in the use of modern technology especially in advertizing and in trying to "sell the good news". But that is precisely where the Catholic on the street can make a huge difference, not by arguing points of theology, liturgy and morals, but rather in showing what it means to "live the faith". People watch Catholics and somehow they know whether one really practices their faith or not. But that is not the most important thing they notice: they also get thrown for a loss when they see a Catholic who is really full of joy.

There is a certain French playwright that puts these words in the mouth of one of his characters: "You call yourself a Christian! Then where the devil is your joy? And that question is in the minds of many as non Catholic, if not most non-Catholics. Part of the problem is that so many good-meaning Christians focus on one point only, be it abortion, gay-marriages or what have you. They fail to see the overall picture and believe that we really do possess the truth. They forget to focus in on the total Christ and who he really was, God made man! And perhaps worst of all, their single-minded focus takes away most if not all of their joy in being Christian and Catholic. They become very difficult people to talk with or to deal with. And the tragedy is that they haven't a clue as to what is really wrong. Thus ultimately their strategy works against them and they unwittingly give support to the opposite side.

So exactly just what is joy and how does it differ from happiness? Most think that man was made to be happy at all times. That is totally wrong and impossible. Too many things go wrong; too many problems appear; that is the warp and woof of life, no one's fault, no rationality behind it. Happiness by its very nature is short lived. But Joy is something far, far different. Joy comes from knowing that all is in order in one's life, that problems can be solved in time, that sorrows will appear, but underneath it all, there is still God working, helping to bring one through the many strands that are out of place. Christ often lost his happiness as when he would argue with his enemies who were irrational and unreasonable, but at the same time never lost his cool for he knew that he was always one with his father.

So to understand that joy can always be a part of one's life no matter what might be happening, one must grow in their trust of God who did promise that he would be with one all their lives. This comes primarily through prayer, prayer that is a straightforward conversation with God. It comes from frequent reception of the sacraments. It comes from as real trust in God. And above all it comes from a firm belief that the world's salvation does not depend solely on one person, on me! Paul understood this and his life with filled with ups and downs, wins and losses, successes and failures. Through it all he never lost sight of Christ. He had a life filled with joy, for God was always with him and he believed this totally.

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