

Homily for 34th Mon.AP, 2020-02-03 Mk-13,9-13

Our Lord went teaching in the Temple, and handled the attempts of various scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, and Herodians to trick Him, in customary disputation, into taking a position where they could get Him condemned. When one scribe asked about the greatest commandment – a traditional game to see who could do it best and get the essence of the Torah in a single commandment – Jesus’ reply won admiration and silenced his questioners. Then He put a question *they* couldn’t answer. He maintained his authority throughout. That brings us up to the point where He left the Temple area and replied to a disciple’s admiration of the Temple with the sobering comment that it’d all be destroyed and leveled.

Now our Lord is sat. He has seated himself on the ground of the Mount of Olives, facing the Temple – and here we enter another long discourse of His. This time, his audience is small. He’s answering a question put Him by only four people: Peter, James, John, and Andrew – four with whom He’s most familiar, among the very first whom He’d called to His public ministry, among the very first who have known Him the longest. They’d asked, simply, “Tells us, when will this be, and what will be the sign when these things are all to be accomplished?” – referring to his sobering comment that all these great buildings of the Temple area would be entirely thrown down. There’s our wider context – and today’s reading is the second of about five day’s worth of liturgical readings into which his reply is divided.

How do we 21st century contemplative monks and our friends and fellow Christians, in a Western culture and technology, compare to our Lord’s four close apostles? Are you and I going to be delivered up to councils, beaten in synagogues, or stand before governors and kings to bear testimony to them for Jesus? Shall we go forth and preach the gospel to all nations, and be delivered up to trial, with God the Holy Spirit speaking through us in courts? Are we and our families going to have one another killed? Are we to be hated by all, for sake of Jesus’ name? It may have seemed unlikely to those four apostles – I don’t know – but I daresay it’s far less likely for many of us than for them (though we should always keep ready for such things, just in case). Even so, we can boost our fervor by putting ourselves in their sandals and pretending it will happen soon, or by doing some part that’s at least remotely related to all their ministries: those are two common and good ways of pondering such passages of the Scriptures.

But suppose, instead, we take a third approach, and glean just the first and the last of our Savior’s statements, which really *do* apply to everyone: first, “Take heed to yourselves”; and, then, “But he who endures to the end will be saved.”

We all ought to be taking heed to ourselves, to be watching out, staying vigilant, keeping track, minding ourselves. We all ought to have an eye on conquering some stubborn fault or bad habit, or on cultivating and nurturing some good habit: that might be called the game of virtues and vices. And we, all of us, ought to be minded to persevere in our Christian faith and morals to the end, come what obstacles may come. In fact, many non-Christians, and many non-apostolic Christians, have done that, both before Christ and after.

For example, Ben Franklin minded his habits, and famously used a sort of home-made graph for it, whose use he described in detail, keeping an eye on thirteen virtues and focusing on one at a time. Just six weeks before he would die, it happened that Ezra Stiles, then president of Yale College and a Calvinist, asked if Franklin would commit his religious beliefs to writing, and he agreed. He wrote, “Here is my Creed: I believe in one God, Creator of the Universe. That He governs it by His Providence. That he ought to be worshipped. That the most acceptable Service we render to him, is doing Good to his other Children. That the Soul of Man is immortal, and will be treated with Justice in another Life respecting its Conduct in this. . . . As for Jesus of Nazareth. . . I think the system of Morals and Religion as he left them to us, the best the World ever saw. . . but I have. . . some Doubts to his Divinity; though’ it is a Question I do not dogmatise upon, having never studied it, and think it is needless to busy myself with it now, where I expect soon an Opportunity of knowing the Truth with less Trouble.” [Yes, there are many things we may learn more easily after we die. . . .] And that, with 4 omissions to condense it, was his reply. John Fea, an historian, wrote: “Franklin’s religious beliefs were quintessentially American and, in many ways, quintessentially Pennsylvanian. It did not matter what one believed about God, as long as one’s religion contributed to a more benevolent society and made the world, one neighborhood at a time, a more enlightened and civilized place.”

Well, that sounds pretty much like what many believe in our own time. It makes for excellent politics, ...but not for a very intimate relationship with Jesus, our Savior, nor for a devout following of Him. One might honestly live by that creed, and possibly attain Heaven, but it lacks much, and is watered down; it's good, yes, but in some respects tepid or lukewarm: somewhat deist, but not fully Christian.

Are we to follow Christ, or our surrounding culture? To follow Christ, we would hear Him and "take heed to ourselves and persevere to the end."

Note: The condensed creed of Ben Franklin and the quote from Mr John Fea were borrowed from:
<http://www.phmc.state.pa.us/portal/communities/pa-heritage/religion-early-politics-benjamin-franklin.html> .