

August 28

Dear friends,

I hope that all of us are taking the best care of our health and safety as we can, and not relaxing our vigilance about washing and distancing and masking. There is a tendency, described well in Atul Gawande's book, "The Checklist Manifesto", to become sloppy and forgetful about things as they become routine. The cure for that, as he outlines it, is to do what surgical teams, pilots, and other folk do when things have to be right every time or catastrophe results: use a check list.

The great enemy of precision—as I would say it—is, oddly enough, frequency. The more you do a thing, the greater the chance for an unintended omission or error. Familiarity may breed contempt, as Geoffrey Chaucer said in "The Tale of Melibee" (Canterbury Tales), but it also encourages inattention. I often speak about the experience of hearing a passage of scripture so often that it rolls through our ears like creek water glides over bottom stones. Our best defense in such instances is paying attention. In the first case by running down a clean-up checklist every time you return from being outside or admitting someone to your home. In the second, we do well to employ different translations of the bible and/or do some background research.

This all helps, I hope, in encouraging us all to really do the 20 second hand wash every time it is recommended to be done, to mask, keep six feet apart, and so on. Yes, we see violations of all of these health protocols everyday on television, in the news, at stores, and on the streets—not to mention the belligerent objections that get raised by people who selfishly resist the medical advice and put others at risk. Pointing out this bad behavior get awkward, (I got an earful at the botanic garden, of all places, for doing so with someone pushing a stroller open-faced), but we cannot be afraid to take care of ourselves and others.

Reading scripture faithfully goes best when we don't isolate and overweight texts to bolster an argument we want to make. As you have heard me say before, "When you take the text out of the context, it may be scripture—but it ain't the gospel". The gospel reading for August 23rd is familiar to us; but because of that, it needs to be looked at more carefully than we usually undertake.

What follows is not an attempt to re-present my homily from last Sunday. So much has happened in nature, in politics, in the lives of ordinary citizens, and in the work of leaders that I hesitate to recreate my words of only a few days ago. Instead, I am going to give you an outline of how I interpreted the gospel text and used that work to shape what I said.

Simon bar Jonah declares that Jesus is the Christ, and he is answered by Jesus with four great declarations: that Simon shall be called Peter, that Jesus will build his Church on the rock of Peter's declaration and Hell shall not prevail against it, and that Peter shall receive the keys to the kingdom so that what is bound on earth is bound in heaven and what is loosed on earth is loosed in heaven. Many of us have heard sermons and had bible studies where the meaning of these texts gets mangled into one or more triumphalist declarations. So, some brief correctives.

Jesus does not say he's building the Church on Peter—that's both ridiculous and pitiful to claim—but on the declaration that Jesus is the Messiah. After all, Peter is a frail, fearful, confused person who has a moment of recognition, insight, and revelation. Peter exactly fits Paul's later description of himself and all the messengers of the gospel—bearers of treasure in earthen jars, "We have this treasure in earthen vessels that the excellency of the power may be of God and not of us." (II Cor 4:7). We must not elevate the container beyond its worth, the servant above the master. But Peter has embraced (for the moment anyway) what he has realized in faith. One day at a time for him, and us, eh?

Hell will not prevail against the Church, says Jesus, but not for lack of trying, and ultimately failing only after securing many, many terrible victories, as we well know. Claims that being a believer saves one from disease, trouble, temptation, and sin are the commonplace mistakes of people who put their claim on their status in our world—but Jesus addresses that elsewhere, "Do not presume to say, 'We have Abraham as our father'." (Mt 3:9). In faith, we follow Jesus where—everywhere—he goes, (even into loss, failure, betrayal, the cross), and we are exempt from nothing. It is not much spoken of now, but it used to be an aim of the spiritual life to become worthy of suffering for the name of Christ. As Paul said of himself in II Corinthians, 4:10, "We always carry around in our bodies the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may be clearly shown in our bodies." And Galatians 6:7, "I carry on myself the scars of Jesus". This is not masochism or

obliteration of self or a denial of our intrinsic worth as human beings. It is the claim that we find our identity and true nature—both equal to all other persons and unique to ourselves—by entering more and more into the imitation of Jesus in our own life and time.

The keys of the kingdom—the third declaration—are neither the door openers to heaven, nor a mechanism to make heaven obey us. God doesn't work for the church—an idea that many folks struggle with—we don't tell God what to do (even Jesus said he was only doing what he was told to do by the Father in John 6:38), and the Lord's prayer is explicit about the will of God bring done on earth as it is (already) in heaven. God is not a cosmic vending machine nor a celestial Robbie the robot. Instead, we should understand that the keys have to do with enabling us to do God's work here, as we are, where we are, and perhaps even discern those tasks more clearly.

Lastly, the “binding” and “loosing” in our reading are formal words the original audience would have understood as mechanisms for interpreting and applying the 617 commandments in the Jewish Scripture, which were understood as guides to faithful, obedient, and thankful lives as members of the people of Israel. Therefore, we are not to set out to act on our own or to pursue our own purposes. We are to be faithful servants and attentive stewards, looking forward to the great day when we may hear, “Well done, good and faithful servant...enter into the joy of your master.”(Mt 25:23).

Perhaps none of what I have offered here strikes you as new or controversial, but there are plenty of folks who would not accept the points I have tried to make. That is the principal reason I have inserted so many text references. You are entitled to know from where I draw my view, and it may spark your thinking, too. And, of course, I hold my self to the standard I spoke of earlier in a broad way—not to lift a text out of the context: there are many texts about disciples and others being servants, very few about the faithful being authoritative and in charge.

I rejoice that so many have been able to join us on Sunday morning and Thursday evening for our Zoom prayer meeting. Please continue to pray for teachers, students, medical professionals, and others at risk.

God's peace and joy.