

Third Sunday in Lent
March 3, 2013
Homily for the Anglican Use Mass
of
St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
Scranton, PA
Luke 13:1-9

In college I had a double major, German and International Affairs, intending at the time to enter the Foreign Service after graduation. Yet at the same time, I knew that God had different plans for me than I had for myself. I remember one Sunday after church, when I was eighteen or nineteen, asking my mother if it were possible to be both a priest and a government worker. I don't remember what she said, but the fact that I asked the question is a reminder to me of how long I ran away from my vocation, how long I was unwilling to set aside my aspirations in order to do what God has assigned me to do.

Fortunately, God was patient with me. Despite my initial rejection of the call to ordained ministry, He kept pulling me until at last I presented myself for orders in the Episcopal Church. Little did I know then that this wasn't all He had called me to do. He kept pulling me closer and closer, drawing me in, until twelve years later I presented myself for Holy Orders in the Catholic Church. God was very patient with me. From the time I first became aware of my call to the priesthood until the day I was ordained a Catholic priest was nearly twenty years.

Our Gospel this morning is about precisely this patience, God's willingness for now to wait until we turn our wills to His and begin bearing the fruit He desires. In the parable, our heavenly Father is the owner of the tree and the vinedresser is Jesus, who, as the letter to the Hebrews reminds us, "always intercedes for us" (*Heb. 7:25*). Even when the Father might be inclined to stop waiting, Jesus intercedes on our behalf and gets us more time to bear fruit, lest we be cut down prematurely. Of course, the Father is more patient than the parable suggests. He waited not four years for me, but twenty. But clearly, His patience is not infinite. Should we wait too long to turn our wills to His, there will be a day of judgment.

This lesson about God's patience has several implications for us. God's patience with us teaches us first that we ought to be patient with ourselves. I could easily be filled with regret for not answering my call sooner, unwilling to forgive myself for my stubborn insistence, putting my glory before God's. But this would be to forget that even during that time outside the fold, God continued to shower me with gifts, while at the same time using me as an instrument of His grace. He gave me a beautiful wife and helped me to form relationships with men in seminary who are now Catholic priests or on their way to ordination. He gave me my children and a few dozen humble souls who were willing to follow me into the Catholic Church. Today we heard in our Old Testament lesson about God's call to Moses. We can all take great comfort in God's choice to use a murderer to lead the chosen people out of Egypt, for it is proof enough that God's vessels of grace are not perfect. We shouldn't be surprised then when, despite our sin, God still asks us to do something to His honor and glory.

The second implication of God's patience proceeds from the first. In the same way we must be patient with ourselves for how long it took us to repent, so we must be patient with others, especially with those who don't really appear to be on the road to repentance.

We had only been Catholic a year-and-a-half when we sponsored and hosted the Anglican Use Conference at which Avery Cardinal Dulles came to Scranton to speak. While we were planning this big event, I was asked whether we might allocate our resources towards something more important than

encouraging people to convert to the Catholic faith. After all, I was told, if they haven't become Catholic yet, what's their problem? There are other people more worthy of our time, talents, and treasure.

As astounded as I was by this impatience, I wasn't angry. I knew by then that we humans have a tendency to forget the struggles of others after ours has passed. We assume that others should know what we know, even if we only came to know it yesterday, because when we finally come to know, it seems so obvious that we can't imagine anyone could miss it. What we are each called to do is remember a time in our own life when God was graciously patient with us, in order that we may never forget to be patient with our neighbor. God's patience is something we are called to share, not keep to ourselves, content simply to have benefitted from it ourselves.

The third implication, then, refers to God Himself. If we are called to be patient with ourselves, and then to be gracious in sharing that patience with others, we must also be patient with God. Our inclination is to want results yesterday, and we expect that our petitions will be answered immediately. It may be, however, that God calls us simply to wait.

Part of what finally awakened me to the truth of the Catholic faith were those five long years God elected not to give Kristina and me the children we asked for. It was during those five years that I studied *The Gospel of Life* and realized I was a minister in a denomination that did not teach what I believed. Had we gotten what we wanted right away, we might not have asked the questions that led us to the answers we needed, both for our good and the good of our parish.

Patience with God is important not only for each of our personal journeys, but also for our corporate life. We have offered a vision for the ministry of this parish which I am sure is God's will for us as much as I know I was called to be a parent when Kristina and I were married almost seventeen years ago. But just as it took us longer than we expected to welcome our first daughter, Clara, so it may be that the implementation of God's will for our parish takes longer than we anticipate. I'm not saying that this will be, only that it took almost eight years to get a building. We might have to wait for a school, too.

And in our corporate life, we must include the wider Church. Cradle Catholics have waited a lot longer than we for God to purge from the ranks of the priesthood what our former Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI called "the filth," those men who are false pastors, devouring the sheep instead of feeding and protecting them. Well, the purge began about ten years ago, and if we are to believe what the Italian media repeats about studies Benedict himself commissioned, the battle has only just begun. In God's time the cleansing we've longed for is coming.

What we learn when we exercise the virtue of patience with ourselves, with our neighbors, and with God Himself is that our Lord is faithful to His promise to protect and provide for His Church, our parish, and our souls. While it isn't always immediately obvious, God will not leave us orphans, nor will He condemn us until we have had ample time to turn from our wickedness and live. We note in our Epistle that St. Paul warns us as we wait that we must not "...grumble, as some...did and were destroyed by the Destroyer" (1 Cor. 10:10). So finally we see that as frustrating as exercising patience may be, we know for certain that it's much preferable to the alternative.

