

Twelfth Sunday after Trinity
August 18, 2013
Homily for the Anglican Use Mass
of
St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
Scranton, PA
Matthew 16:13-19

The lessons from Scripture that were just read are different than what was read this morning in other Roman Rite Catholic parishes. That's because today, August 18th, is the actual anniversary of the dedication of St. Joseph Church, and thus we are permitted to use the propers to commemorate this occasion. Every year August 18th will be for St. Thomas More Parish a Solemnity, and I want to begin by saying how thankful I am that so many of you have come to celebrate with us today. As you leave Mass today, make sure you get from one of the ushers this holy card that we had made in thanksgiving for all your prayers and material generosity. Please continue to keep us in prayer, and share this card with whomever you think might offer up petitions on behalf of our mission here in Scranton.

When we look at the lessons we heard, we can first contrast the tabernacle we heard about in the Old Testament lesson with the one that is here in St. Joseph Church. Whereas the tabernacle in Solomon's temple held the law that Moses received from God on Mount Horeb, our tabernacle holds God Himself. And this is true in every church where the Blessed Sacrament is present: God is not simply the lawgiver from on high, but imminently present with the faithful, offering through the ministry of the Church the holiness and strength required to be missionaries to a broken world.

By virtue of God's presence in the tabernacle our lesson from Hebrews describes what we encounter when we assist at the Mass. The author reminds us that we have come to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. In our midst, here in this place, are innumerable angels right alongside us humans who have come to worship, "the assembly of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven." The Mass thus is a foretaste of heaven, and for this reason every Catholic church ought to be adorned as this one is, with a representation of those who have gone before us, those who are more than enrolled in heaven, but who actually stand before the Throne of Grace.

Nevertheless, God is actually present here, as I mentioned earlier, and the writer to the Hebrews remembers, as well, making reference to the judge who is God of all. And those who have gone before us are not present only in the representations we have of them in our statues and mosaics, our lesson from Hebrews tells us we are in the presence of the spirits of just men made perfect. Finally, we are in the presence of Jesus, whose blood has redeemed us from sin and thus "speaks more graciously than the blood of Abel." At the Mass we are actually at the foot of the cross of Calvary, where Jesus offered His blood for our redemption and here offers it for our consumption, that we may be more closely united to Him. How amazing that the letter to the Hebrews could speak so beautifully about the Mass when the Church was still so young. Yet every word he wrote applies today. Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

The Letter to the Hebrews describes an impressive force arrayed for the propagation of the good. With us are the angels and saints, but more importantly, we stand in communion with him who won the victory over sin and death. It is in the context of the heavenly hosts, the army of heaven, that we must understand the promise Jesus made to St. Peter in today's Gospel. Jesus said to him, "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it." We see here that

the Church is on the offense, storming the gates of hell, behind which hide the forces of wickedness, the devil and his minions.

This is an important lesson to remember on the anniversary of the dedication of a church. We are tempted to think of our church as a fortress, and the enemies of the Church want us to think in this way. But the reality is that our church is more like a base camp than a fortress. This is the place where we receive our marching orders, along with all that we require to fulfill our mission. We come back, over and over again, not to hide behind the walls in the posture of the evil one, but to replenish our stores and receive updates to the orders first given to us at baptism. The forces arrayed with us are impressive, so we do not fear because we know that though the devil's fortress looks formidable, it will in the end fall to the forces of righteousness, of which we are a part.

We can characterize ourselves as such only because of one more thing we receive here at church. In the back is the confessional, where we receive from Jesus Himself the forgiveness of our sins, along with counsel and the penance by which we make reparation for our bad choices. We take comfort in the other thing Jesus said to Peter. "I will give you the Keys of the Kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." Now that we are finally united with the successor of St. Peter, we know our sins are forgiven, and we can fight the good fight with a clear conscience.

I am reminded in all of this of our late Holy Father, Blessed John Paul II, who will be canonized later this year. His first words to us after he became Pope were "Be not afraid," and parishes like ours are part of his legacy. The Pastoral Provision, which he instituted and under which I was ordained, came to fruition in the erection of the Ordinariates in Great Britain, North America, and Australia, so we owe him a particular debt of gratitude for entrusting our ministry to us.

But I was reminded of him because of the challenges he faced when he was elected to the papacy in 1978. Before him was the Iron Curtain, somewhat akin to the gates of hell, since behind it God was denied while the innocent were slaughtered. By the time he died in 2005, the fortress that had appeared so formidable three decades before was already long conquered, and the Church had moved on to fight battles more pressing against foes new and old. His example is an encouragement to us because the challenges we face certainly look as formidable as the threat of Soviet communism did thirty years ago. But Blessed John Paul II believed the promises of Christ. He believed the gates of hell would not prevail against the Church, and so must we believe. The fortresses named Planned Parenthood and Legalized Abortion are going to fall, too, as will the fortresses named Islamofascism and Atheistic Humanism. They will fall because the Catholic Church continues to storm the gates of hell, and Jesus has promised us the victory, that life in the end will overcome death. We are blessed to have entered into the fight, and we give thanks that God has given us such a glorious base camp at which to resupply before going forth with our compatriots in the heavenly hosts.