

Fifteenth Sunday after Trinity
September 8, 2013
Homily for the Anglican Use Mass
of the
St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
Scranton, PA
Luke 14:25-33

Today is the beginning of our new season for our Little Flowers and Blue Knights girls and boys clubs, which meet on the second Sunday of every month during the school year. The fathers take turns teaching the Blue Knights, and today is my turn. I'm glad I go today because our lesson, an example of discipleship, is on the English martyrs who perished during the reign of Elizabeth I in the sixteenth century. This afternoon I will teach our boys about those who wear the martyr's crown, but this morning I'm going to talk to you about those who started to build, but were not able to finish.

Under Elizabeth I the English government was an apparatus of terror, used to enforce compliance with the laws that promoted adherence to state-sponsored Protestantism. Capital crimes included being ordained a priest abroad and simply entering the country. Citizens could also be executed for sheltering a priest. If one refused to attend weekly Protestant worship services, he would first be fined; and if he persisted, his property would be confiscated and he would be jailed.

There was no freedom of religion. The requirement to attend Protestant services on Sunday fell upon everyone, even Catholics, whose neighbors would often inform the authorities about weekly absence from Church. As Catholics became associated with treason, the Queen enriched those loyal to her by giving them properties she had seized from their Catholic countrymen. Torture was often used to garner coerced confessions, and some women fared very badly after their arrest and imprisonment.

And yet Catholicism is true; so the Jesuit mission to England, designed to bring the sacraments to Catholics in hiding, made many converts. The zeal of the converts was impressive, as hundreds of men traveled to the continent to be educated, ordained, and sent back to England to win more converts. The price of being caught, however, was very high. Not only were family members harassed, the victim himself would be castrated, disemboweled, hanged, decapitated, and quartered, his body parts being sent to four different places in the realm.

To avoid this horrific outcome, persecuted Catholics condemned to death were given a choice: if they renounced their Catholic faith and confessed the state Protestant religion, they would be set free. Not only that, the Queen then promised to shower with gifts those who would turn away from their Catholicism. Much too frequently the threat of torture and the promise of earthly rewards issued in apostasy: the Catholic would literally walk down off the scaffold before the eyes of those who had come to watch him die, only he was no longer in communion with Holy Mother Church.

The parables Jesus told in the Gospel we heard this morning were addressed to just such people. He tells us that we require three gifts if we are to begin to build and finish the project assigned to us. He begins by describing the virtues of detachment. He uses the word "hate" in reference to wife, children, parents, even our own lives; and what He means is that our temporal attachments cannot keep us from attaining our eternal destiny. If our attachments in this life are an inhibition to our seeing the life to come, then we must abandon our attachment; we must be detached.

Part of the reason so many potential English martyrs failed in their defense of the true Faith is that they chose attachments rather than detachment. That is, they didn't want to die, or they didn't want to be separated from the ones they loved. They were more loyal to the people they could see than the God they could not. Alternatively, they may have desired wealth and the approval of men more than poverty and the commendation of God. Either way, the things of this life had a stronger pull than the treasures of heaven. They chose the temporal over the eternal.

The second virtue that Jesus commends to us is fortitude. To carry one's cross one must accept that suffering in this life is a part of attaining the life to come. Yet if we lack fortitude, what we commonly call courage, then we will turn back at the first sign that the suffering may be more than we can bear. To have fortitude means we have confidence that we can bear every trial, however challenging it may appear; and then we endure the suffering we must face for the benefit of those we love.

We must have sympathy for those who faltered on the scaffold, even as we have sympathy for those today who are afraid of the suffering they are called to endure. The distinction we must make for those who lack courage is the difference between the temporary suffering of this life and the eternal suffering we may have to face if we deny Jesus before men, if we aren't willing to carry our cross with Jesus. As St. Thomas More, our patron, reminded his wife, giving into fear may grant him twenty more years on earth, but it could also land him in hell forever.

Thus, Jesus reminds us of the third virtue we require if we are to finish the race. In order for us to have the courage to say good-bye to the lives we love, we must have faith; we must believe that the sacrifices we make will issue for us in eternal life. As surely as we believe Jesus rose from the dead on Easter Sunday, we must believe that we will rise with Him if we endure to the end.

Faith is the basis for all detachment and fortitude. If we lack faith, then it makes perfect sense that we would choose wealth over treasures in heaven, because our senses perceive the things of this world, and we lack the sixth sense that perceives the things of the life to come. If we lack faith, then we will naturally move to avoid suffering, as we lack the apprehension that suffering can be redemptive, that our own pain can aid in our neighbor receiving gifts of inestimable joy.

As we approach a time of trial for the Church, we must ask ourselves if we have the detachment, fortitude, and faith that we need to keep us from walking down off the scaffold. Can we face the trials the English and Welsh martyrs faced and endure with them to the end? If in our self-examination we discern that the answer is no, that we would fall short, we needn't despair. This simply means we have counted well the cost and found ourselves lacking. It does not mean the grace we need is unavailable. It is, and the Church can help you gain what you require. Just ask for help.