

Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Trinity

November 10, 2013

Homily for the Anglican Use Mass

of

St. Thomas More Catholic Parish

celebrated at

St. Joseph Catholic Church

Scranton, PA

Luke 20:27-38

The Maccabean revolt took place about 160 years before the birth of Christ, and the ultimate result of the sacrifices about which we heard this morning was Jewish independence, which they won from the Seleucid Empire. What we heard read this morning from Second Maccabees was an abbreviated account of the death of seven sons, while their mother was forced to watch.

The issue was that the Greek-speaking ruler wished for all of their subjects to adopt Greek culture, including the Greek diet, which included pork. Of course, we know it is against the Jewish law, as it is articulated in the first five books of the Bible, to eat the flesh of pigs. Thus, an easy way that the rulers could determine who conformed to Greek customs was to see who would eat pork. A Jew could save his earthly life by eating the pork, even under duress. The seven sons we heard about today would not sin to save their earthly lives because they believed in the resurrection of the dead. That is, they were willing to die to preserve the truth of their religion because they had faith that God would reward them for their steadfastness in the life to come.

So what about the Jews we encountered in our Gospel today? St. Luke records very clearly that the Sadducees are “those who say that there is no resurrection.” The Sadducees were also from the priestly class. Indeed, they were the men who governed the Temple and offered the daily sacrifices prescribed by the Law. But they did so under Roman occupation. Between the time of the Maccabees and the time of Jesus the Jews had again lost their independence, but a compromise with the Roman Empire had been reached. Of all the subject peoples in the Empire, the Jews alone would not have to worship the emperor, who claimed he was a god. However, to placate the Romans, the Sadducees agreed to make a sacrifice for the emperor every day in the Temple.

For many Jews this constituted collaboration with the enemy, and the Zealots especially demanded that the sacrifices for the emperor stop. What we can see from a theological and historical perspective is that their lack of faith in the resurrection of the dead enabled them to make compromises. Neither fearing retribution from God nor looking forward to receiving their just reward from God for their fidelity on earth, the Sadducees compromised with their Roman oppressors to maintain their portion of wealth and status.

So they were morally compromised, but they weren't stupid. Their use of the example of seven Jewish men dying before the same woman was a not-so-subtle dig at seven heroes from the Jewish war of independence. Those seven heroes had inspired their nation by their sacrifice, and belief in the resurrection of the dead was widespread by the time Jesus walked the earth. As the Sadducees compromised with the brutal Romans and used an example of seven dead Jewish brothers, they implied that the seven heroes of Jewish history had died in vain. Far from being a cause for celebration because of their witness to the truth, the Sadducees would have maintained that they died to no purpose. They should have compromised then, just like the Sadducees compromised with the Romans. They would have extended their lives and kept their mother from mourning.

Such pragmatism, we know, is contrary to faith, so Jesus pointed out to the Sadducees that faith in the resurrection of the dead goes back much further than the Maccabees. Jesus shows that this faith existed at the very beginning of Israel's exodus from Egypt. Jesus point out that God said to Moses, "I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob," that the Lord is God of the living. The patriarchs, Jesus tells the Sadducees, are alive today because the resurrection is true, and thus they are wrong. The resurrection is an integral part of Jewish belief, and the Sadducees could not reject it without rejecting Judaism itself.

And neither can we reject belief in the life to come without rejecting Catholicism. This means that we cannot truly be considered Christian unless we behave on earth as though we expect to be accountable after death. The beauty of our Old Testament lesson today is that the faith of the Jewish martyrs is close to that of Catholic martyrs down through the ages. The brothers told their persecutors, "We are ready to die rather than transgress the laws of our fathers." And this is what our patron told those who wanted to put him to death for his defense of the Church. St. Thomas More knew that compromise on certain matters on earth could well mean the death of his soul, so he was willing to offer his life in defense of the truth.

Not everyone possessed the same insight, and others just didn't have the courage. The English martyrs inspire us five hundred years later, but in their own day too many Englishmen ignored their witness and were willing to deny the faith of their fathers in order to curry favor with the King—or at least to stay off the scaffold. Where the Maccabean revolt and the deaths of the Jewish martyrs issued in Jewish independence, the English martyrs watched St. Mary's dowry become a Protestant nation and now a secularized shell of a once-proud nation.

Therefore, the story of the martyrs and their faith in the resurrection of the dead demands from us who still walk the earth a proper response. Are we Catholics on the surface but in reality like the Sadducees, pragmatists at heart, willing to compromise to get along with those who lord their power over us? Or are we Catholics of conviction, assured because of our faith in the resurrection that our sacrifices will be vindicated when Jesus comes to judge the living and the dead?

When we are presented with a question that requires we compromise or suffer draconian consequences, we have just one question to ask ourselves. Do I truly believe that I will one day meet God face to face to make account of my choices? Or put another way, is my faith in God's faithfulness strong enough to sustain me through the sacrifices I must make to remain true?

How we respond to the sacrifices of the martyrs will go a long way towards indicating whether our particular mission will be successful. We know the Church triumphs in the end, but will our mission be a part of that story? St. Thomas More, pray for us.