

Twenty-Fifth Sunday after Trinity
November 17, 2013
Homily for the Anglican Use Mass
of
St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
Scranton, PA
Luke 21:5-19

Our Gospel speaks today of the things we as believers are unable to control. In the context of Jesus' prophecy about the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple, Jesus predicts wars, tumults, famines, and the persecution that Christians would endure for the sake of the Gospel. Jesus even tells his disciples not to meditate on what they will say when the persecution comes, promising instead that the Holy Spirit will give wisdom that the adversaries of the Church will be able neither to withstand or contradict. So, on the one hand, it sounds like Jesus is insisting that little we do makes any difference as events unfold around us, except the decision to endure when the persecution comes.

But, on the other hand, we have St. Paul's epistle to the Thessalonians today, which includes one of the most famous passages in the New Testament: "If anyone will not work, let him not eat." How do we reconcile these two perspectives: that there is much the Christian does not control, yet at the same time this is no excuse for idleness; and that we must work hard nonetheless?

The answer comes partly in recognizing who the audience was in each of today's lessons. Jesus was speaking to those who would witness only forty years after His death and resurrection the Jewish War and the attendant destruction of Jerusalem. This destruction was God's retribution visited upon the generation that decided to hand over the Son of God to His Passion. Jesus talks as though there is much His disciples could not control, because these tribulations were appointed as soon as Jesus was crucified. The killers were given about forty years to repent, and then the judgment came.

In Paul's case, he was dealing with a community of people looking forward to the second coming of Jesus Christ, expecting that the end of the world was to come very soon. Therefore, a good number of the Thessalonians decided that if Jesus was coming tomorrow, then working hard today doesn't make much sense. St. Paul had to remind them that, one, we don't know precisely when Jesus is coming back to judge the living and the dead and, two, every day that one does not work he is depending upon others in the community to work for him. Telling lazy people that they don't get any food was meant as a corrective to bad behavior: Get to work or you'll soon starve.

But St. Paul is also pointing out something important about the value of our individual labors. He notes first that he worked as an example to them. That is, his hard work was meant to show them how hard they are to work. And though he had the right to take money for his labors on behalf of the Gospel, he did not, so that he wouldn't burden any of those he had been called to shepherd. He provided for them without their providing for him.

This example teaches us about whom our work is to benefit. St. Paul worked so that maximum benefits would come to his children in Christ. His work, in other words, was not undertaken to feed him, though it enabled him to do that. His work was undertaken to feed others. If our work is for ourselves, then it is easy to stop working when we think we'll stop benefitting. But if our work is for our children in Christ, those we want to bring to the truth and the life, then we'll work harder, as hard as we must out of a desire for their souls.

Therefore, when we fail to work or refuse to work, we cease participating in the redemption of the world; we stop facilitating the reconciliation to God the Father of those whom the Lord Jesus died to serve. St. Paul wanted all of his parishioners to work so that they would take responsibility for each other's salvation. If they stopped working, it showed they weren't invested in anybody's eternal destiny except their own.

Such an orientation is destructive to the life of the community; but it is also deadly to the spiritual life of him who adopts idleness as a manner of existence. Refusing to work for the benefit of others is the equivalent of being physically deprived of food. When we turn inward and serve only ourselves, we will die as surely as if we were to receive no material sustenance.

Conversely, when we work for the benefit of others, we find we benefit also. Not only do we receive the gratitude of those we have aided, but our hearts are opened to the needs of still more people. For all the work he did on their behalf, the Thessalonians were eager to give him money. He took that gift and then distributed it amongst the needy in Jerusalem, who at the time were experiencing a severe famine. He helped to keep them alive, prevented them from starving, because he insisted that those who don't work should starve.

This material gift that St. Paul gave encouraged the Christians at Jerusalem to remain faithful. After all, the aid from abroad strengthened their faith at a time when no matter how hard they worked there was still too little to eat. And the strengthening of their faith led to their obedience when the time came to depart from Jerusalem because the sign of its imminent destruction had been revealed. Before Titus burned the Temple, destroyed Jerusalem, slaughtered the defenders and enslaved the innocent, the Christians had already left because of the words we heard in the Gospel today. St. Paul had gone to trial in Rome, where eventually he would be martyred; but the Church in the Holy Land was spared because the Christians there had kept the faith and fled the destruction—this due in no small part to the encouragement St. Paul had offered through the gift he had collected from all the other Churches.

We don't know how our work will affect others, especially in those times when we imagine wrongly that our work won't make any difference one way or the other. The key is that we keep working and trust that God will direct the benefits as He sees fit. Because in the end the labor of the Thessalonians issued in the preservation of the Jerusalem Church, even after Jerusalem was no more. As St. Paul called on them to work, they could not see how valuable their work would be. But they persevered, and so we even to this day have benefitted from their sacrifice.

What was true then is true today. We are part of a great work, all the pieces of which are not at all clear to us; but God is using our work here to build up the faith in people half-way across the globe, people whom we may not meet until we stand together before the throne of grace. But when we do, the veil will be lifted; and we will know how God used our labor. And we will hear the words for which we long: "Well done, good and faithful servant."