

Homily for Ordinary Time XIII, 2018 (Year B)

July 1, 2018

“...may you excel in this gracious act ... Not that others should have relief while you are burdened, but that as a matter of equality your abundance at the present time should supply their needs, so that their abundance may also supply your needs, that there may be equality.”

We just heard that from Saint Paul. I'll come back to it. But first, the Gospel:

Jesus heals today not just as acts of kindness to suffering individuals, but as an announcement that in Him God is setting the upside-down world back rightside-up. Everything that acts against human well-being (what the Book of Wisdom called “the envy of the devil” which brings death) will be destroyed in what Jesus demonstrates by his healings is now beginning: the “kingdom of God,” Who governs justly, sets wrongs right, and does away with whatever harms humankind. Now back to Saint Paul.

When Paul writes to the church at Corinth, he's taking up a collection; but just as with Jesus in the Gospel, Paul is about more than just kindness to individuals who are suffering. Paul is quite deliberately casting this collection this way: The Risen Christ, the church, is continuing to do what Jesus did in his earthly ministry. Paul wants the church as a whole to announce and to demonstrate that “the envy of the devil” is being driven out by a new way of life that shares the gifts of God even with strangers. That new way in which Christ acts through his Church is a collective action – the embodiment of the new world God is bringing into being. Sharing and generosity are, in God's new world, not walled-in to friends and family, individuals caring for their kin, as was the custom in the Roman world of Paul's time.

A story: about two hundred years after Paul wrote, a pagan young man named Pachomius was drafted into the Roman army and sent away from home and family down the Nile River to fight. On his lonely journey he was surprised that, when his troopship put in to port, it was visited by Christians bringing food and companionship to the draftees, greeting and caring for these strangers. Generosity toward strangers was unknown in Roman culture, so this gesture led the young soldier, when he got out of service, to investigate who these odd people were, and then to become a Christian, and eventually to found what is considered the first Christian monastery. We celebrated the feast day of Saint Pachomius about six weeks ago. Pachomius saw the new world being created in the midst of the old through those Christian visitors, and he was attracted to it; and that attraction changed his life.

In his Apostolic Exhortation *The Joy of the Gospel*, our Holy Father Pope Francis wrote this:

More than by fear of going astray, my hope is that we will be moved by the fear of remaining shut up within structures which give us a false sense of security, within rules which make us harsh judges, within habits which make us feel safe, while at our door people are starving and Jesus does not tire of saying to us: “Give them something to eat.” (#49)

The Holy Father's words are about generosity to individuals in need, but much more about the whole church acting as the Risen Christ, modeling God's community of inclusive justice. The

insistence “...that there may be equality,” as Saint Paul observed two millennia s before Francis, is still at the heart of God’s new creation and is the central challenge to Christians of every generation.

One of the saddest aspects of my ministry is dealing with the depression and hopelessness of too many young people, who are often burdened with debt and without access to the basics of a first-world society: no decent and affordable health care for themselves or their children; little prospect of a secure job that will allow a modest independent life; few trustworthy leaders in business, government, education, or, frankly, in the church. This leaves me with a heartfelt wish: that we Christians could put our infighting, squabbling, and divisions aside to offer a unified voice for a more equal society and a more just world. (It would also help if our church got its own act together.) These past weeks we have seen the churches in our country largely unite against the government policy of taking children away from immigrant families – and that unified witness has had at least a temporary effect. But “the envy of the devil” continues to cause human tragedy and suffering in countless ways, and it should be met by a united witness and action by the churches on more fronts than this.

Individual charity is wonderful, and indispensable. But as Saint Paul understood, Christians together have a job to do, to be the “light of the world” on how we as a human society can live differently.

To close with more from Pope Francis:

It is essential to draw near to new forms of poverty and vulnerability, in which we are called to recognize the suffering Christ, even if this appears to bring us no tangible and immediate benefits. I think of the homeless, the addicted, refugees, indigenous peoples, the elderly who are increasingly isolated and abandoned, and many others. Migrants present a particular challenge for me, since I am a pastor of a Church without frontiers, a Church which considers herself mother to all. (#210)

Today’s Scriptures urge us to realize that we are members of Christ’s Risen Body, together acting toward strangers with the generosity Christ has shown to us; giving example, by how we conduct ourselves, of what God is doing to set his creation right again.