

June 22, 2018 Friday of 11th Week of the Year (2Kgs.11:1f; Mt.6:19-23)

St. John Fisher/St. Thomas More, Martyrs

Mass to observe opening of Religious Freedom Week

For the last two weeks, our daily Gospel Readings have been “snippets” taken from the 5th and 6th chapters of St. Matthew’s Gospel, which we all know as the Sermon on the Mount.

This inaugural sermon that Jesus teaches on the hillside in Galilee sets the stage for Jesus, the Word of God made Flesh, to be the Teacher of all Truth, and it provides the foundational principles and essential values for all of us who profess to be followers of Jesus.

As we know, that lengthy sermon begins with Jesus teaching us the Beatitudes, which challenge any/all of our “me-attitudes” to be those of what it means to “be” one with Jesus, and what Pope Francis, in his new and important Apostolic Exhortation “Gaudete et Exsultate” on the universal call to all people to live lives of holiness, calls “every Christian’s ID card”.

Jesus also taught us that we are to be the “salt of the earth” and the light of the world”; He taught the importance of our being reconciled and at peace with our sisters and brothers before we can offer our gifts of worship to God; and He gave the terribly challenging mandate that we “turn the other cheek”, “go the extra mile”, and “offer our coat when someone asks us for our shirt”.

And, in the midst of all those challenging teachings, today Jesus reminds us what's at stake: it's not about what treasures or possessions, which are finite and passing, that we're able to amass over our lifetime in this world, that is important; it's about what "treasures" we are storing up for us in Heaven.

In other words, what Jesus is teaching in the Sermon on the Mount is how to live in our homes in this world, with our eyes and our heart set on the world to come, which is our lasting home.

And that's why it's important that we see, hear and value what's important clearly and according to the standards that Jesus teaches us.

Today we begin a Week of Prayer for Religious Freedom here in our country. It purposely begins today when the Church celebrates the lives of two great martyrs for religious freedom: St. John Fisher and St. Thomas More, and continues through June 29th, the Solemnity of Sts. Peter and Paul, two other martyrs who gave their lives rather than submit to the authority of the Emperor.

As we know, John Fisher was a bishop and Thomas More was a married man, father of four, and the Lord Chancellor, both of whom were at the service of the King of England, Henry VIII. Because both of them refused to follow the King's directives to approve his divorce so he could marry Anne Boleyn, nor to approve the King's claim that he was the supreme head of the Church in England, they were each beheaded, John Fisher on this date in 1535 and Thomas More two weeks later on July 6th.

We are blessed in the United States to know that our country was founded on the principles of faith, and that the very First Amendment is devoted to religious freedom: both that Congress would never establish a state religion, nor would it ever prohibit the free exercise of religion.

Over the years, as we know, there has been a certain eroding of interpretations, and some outright legislation that contradicts some of our basic moral principles.

It is critically important that we remain vigilant, and insist that our country's principles be followed, and that religious freedom remain a protected value for all.

That, of course, means more than having the freedom to go to Mass on Sundays or pray the Rosary at home. It's about whether we can contribute to the common good of all Americans from the perspective of our Faith, and from the foundational teachings of Jesus found in the Sermon on the Mount and the tenets of our Catholic Faith.

Are we free to do the good works---the corporal and spiritual works of mercy---- that our faith calls us to do without having to compromise or be discriminated against because of those principles?

As we heard in today's bloody First Reading, there have been many times in history when religion and faith have been compromised, and when innocent people were persecuted by the forces of power and influence.

Sadly, there are many examples of that very same reality taking place in many parts of the world right now---places where people are persecuted, and killed, just because they profess belief in Jesus.

This Religious Freedom Week calls us all to vigilance and to make sure that we do not take our basic freedoms for granted.

As we prayed in today's Opening Prayer, "may St. John Fisher and St. Thomas More give us the courage to proclaim our faith by the witness of our lives". And may Jesus, the Light of the World and the Teacher of all Truth, continue to help us to see, hear and love with generous hearts in this world, with our eyes and heart set on the treasures awaiting us in Heaven.

God bless you now and always!