

Homily Notes, Sunday September 2, 2018, 22nd Ordinary Time

Readings: Dt 4:1-2,6-8; James 1:17-18, 21b-22, 27; Mark 7, 1-8, 14-15, 21- 23

1. Summary: At a time of moral crisis in the Church, what is an appropriate response? Is it not a call to live in obedience to fundamental teachings of the Bible and of the Church, seeking to live genuinely the spirit of the Lord through those commandments?

2. Scripture lessons:

3. The first reading is Moses explaining advantages of being faithful to the statutes and decrees that God has given them. He highlights the two ways (see Deut 30:15-20); the one of obedience with blessings and the other of idolatry which leads to judgement and failure. He reminds the Israelites of that covenant that God offered at Mt. Horeb. Obedience is the way to thank Him for His love and fidelity and to gain. In today's crisis of abuse we can see the failure to obey God's guidance.

4. The responsorial psalm describes a person who practices true religion – blameless and just, thoughtful and honest in dealing with others. This illustrates the deceit and deception of those who engaged in abuse and those who failed to discipline it.

5. In the second reading: Here we begin five weeks of readings from the Letter of St. James. James, more clearly than any other writer in the New Testament makes clear that we not only must know and affirm the works of God, we must also live them. We also have here the only formal definition of "religion" in the entire Bible. St. James defines true religion as keeping the Word of God; by being doers of the Word, especially by helping the needy, the poor and the weak in the community (the most vulnerable as we say in E & I), and by keeping oneself "unstained" by the world (that is, holiness).

6. What might that mean for us in our situations here in Chandler? We want to embody love, instruction, and care for all members of our community. We need to know and live out the guidelines given us by Sacred Scripture and presented clearly in the program of Ethics and Integrity. If we can do this we can also live out the virtue, "hospitality." In the conference on Stewardship which I attended this past week in Wichita, Kansas, their first emphasis was on being hospitable. How can we be that way here at the church and in town?

7. In today's Gospel, Jesus describes true religion as serving God and all His children with a pure and holy heart. The occasion is a debate between Jesus and the Pharisees on the subject of "Tradition." Jesus warns the Pharisees against their tendency to equate traditional "human precepts" with God's will. He blames the scribes and the Pharisees for giving undue importance to external observances in the name of "tradition," while ignoring the Law's real spirit. These were extra rules that they had added to the basics of the commandments. True religion should focus on the essentials. In particular, Jesus criticizes Pharisaic observance of ritual washing and declares that it is our inner motivations and dispositions that produce our purity or impurity.

8. There is a danger in seeking to have a "heart-felt" religion without the objective guidance of God. One of the things that happened after the Council was a willingness to not deal with sin. Another was not to put much emphasis on "obedience." A third was to take out much of the emphasis on the necessity of exorcism and the powers of the Evil One.

9. Jesus, in his own way here, like James, calls for a life of holiness. He also gives a dramatic list of destructive, sinful behaviors. These are the behaviors that would "stain" us. To what degree might these describe us? If people saw us behaving in these negative ways, would they think that we had true faith? Would they then want to follow Jesus? Look at this list:

From within people, from their hearts, come evil thoughts, unchastity, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, licentiousness, envy, blasphemy, arrogance, folly. All these evils come from within and they defile (Mark 7:21-23).

10. Wait a minute. First Jesus says that he wants a “heart-felt” genuine faith? Then he describes these evil things that come “from their hearts”. How do I know what “heart-felt” thing I should do and what I should avoid? In the absence of the commandments and rigorous church discipline how many of these evils could be rationalized? How can you and I keep straight while living a religion of the heart?

11. Check out the Catechism on “Passions” (Catholic language for feelings). CCC 1763.

These are “emotions or dispositions which incline us to good or evil actions, such as love and hate, hope and fear, joy and sadness, and anger.” (Glossary).

“In themselves, passions are neither good nor evil. They are morally qualified only to the extent that they effectively engage reason and will...”(1767).

“Strong feelings are not decisive for the morality or the holiness of persons; they are simply the inexhaustible reservoir of images and affections in which the moral life is expressed.” (1768).

12. This means that we need to control and direct our feelings by our minds informed by God. We literally need to tell ourselves how we ought to feel! See Romans 12:1-2 for St. Paul’s guidance on this: “Sacrifice of Body and Mind.” We ourselves, and especially our leaders, must do this.

“I urge you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship. Do not conform yourself to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect.”

13. How can we be transformed and have our minds renewed? By the Word of God (especially the commandments) and especially the Words of Jesus. This is why both education and prayer are so important, especially of us as adults and of our leaders.

14. What is needed now? We need holiness, faithfulness and obedience. This is not the first time that a crisis like this has struck the Church. St. John Chrysostom (d.349-407) is said to have said: “The road to hell is paved with the skulls of erring priests, with bishops as their signposts.” We need to make firm our personal resolve in the faith and support our Bishop in his priorities.

15. I am so happy and encouraged by what is going on here at St. Boniface at the same time I am revolted by what is going on in many parts of our church and in our politics! Thank you so much for your faithfulness and willing to have a vision into the future. Several of our programs are models for our Diocese and can help us move in the right direction. We need to have our eyes open for the divisive and destructive works of the Evil One. Let us continue to grow in prayer and faithfulness!