

SERMON NOTES

Sunday, November 16, 2008

Synaxis Gospel

Luke 9:44-50

GREATNESS AND HUMILITY CELEBRATING THE EVE OF ADVENT

INTRODUCTION

On the first eve of Advent, a momentous Divine decision was being implemented. That decision is described for us by St. Paul in his letter to the Philippians. In the second chapter we read of the great humility of Jesus Christ:

“Who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bondservant, and being made in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”¹

St Paul exhorts his readers to adopt this same attitude of humility as did our God. We are to “do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind,” we are to “regard one another as more important” than ourselves. Is it an accident that our reading for this Sunday, the Eve of Advent, draws our attention to this essential characteristic for the followers of our Lord?

Our setting is the eve of our Lord’s final journey to Jerusalem. The completion of His mission was fast approaching. He wanted to prepare His beloved disciples for what lay ahead. They needed to know that the adulation of the marveling crowds would dissipate. The road to Jerusalem would lead to His rejection and death on the Cross.

The twelve had returned from their first assignment as Apostles and reported their success wherever they went, using the power that Jesus had given them to heal the sick and cast out demons. Before they could catch their breaths, the welcoming crowds had descended upon Jesus. After a long day of teaching, Jesus had fed more than five thousand people who had gathered in that deserted place. The disciples were riding high and were confident that Jesus was the Christ Who would soon be revealed as the foretold glorious King.

The disciples had tasted power and prestige during their recent assignment, but they were not ready for the rough days—and years—that lay ahead. More than a week had passed

¹ Philippians 2:6-8

since He had first warned them, “The Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day.”² He had explained that all those who followed Him must be prepared to suffer, and even die, for His sake. But the disciples were absorbed in visions of glory days and could not accept that their King must die.³ In their unbelief, their power left them.⁴

Now Jesus had returned from the Mount of Transfiguration where Peter, James, and John had witnessed His discussion with Moses and Elijah about the crucifixion that awaited Him. Dazzled by the sight of the King in His glory, they had totally missed the point of the conversation. Meanwhile, in Jesus’ absence, the other disciples had been unable to exorcise a demon possessed child. Their lack of power was now obvious.⁵

Seeing Jesus, the father of the demon possessed child turned from the disciples to their Master. He begged Jesus to do what the disciples had been unable to do. Our reading begins just after Jesus had exorcised the demon. While the exuberant and enthusiastic crowd was amazed at the miracle, and praising God for His greatness, Jesus spoke firmly to the disciples.

SYNTAXIS READING

Luke 9:44-50

“Let these words sink into your ears; for the Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men.”

But they did not understand this statement, and it was concealed from them so that they might not perceive it; and they were afraid to ask Him about this statement.

And an argument arose among them as to which of them might be the greatest. But Jesus, knowing what they were thinking in their heart, took a child and stood him by His side, and said to them, “Whoever receives this child in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me receives Him Who sent Me; for he who is least among you, this is the one who is great.

And John answered and said, “Master, we saw someone casting out demons in Your Name; and we tried to hinder him because he does not follow along with us.”

² Luke 9:22

³ Cf. Matthew 16:22 and Mark 8:32.

⁴ Luke 9:41. Mark emphasizes the point in Mark 9:23. Matthew 17:20 clearly states their lack of faith.

⁵ Cf. Matthew 17:19

But Jesus said to him, "Do not hinder him, for he who is not against you is for you."

NOTES

“Let these words sink into your ears;

Literally, “*You*, lay up (or store up) for yourselves these words into your ears.” This is a command with the emphasis on ‘You’. “Listen to Me!! And remember!!” In contrast to the excited crowd that was marveling over the miracles, Jesus commanded the disciples to mark well what He was about to tell them.

for the Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men.”

The particle ‘for’ could point either to the reason why they should store up the words or it could be used to underscore the certainty that He will die. Both may be in view.

This is Jesus’ second prediction of the crucifixion in Luke. The first was after Peter had answered the question, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter’s answer was, “You are the Christ of God.” At that time Jesus had warned and instructed them not to tell this to anyone. He had gone on to say, “The Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day.” In the case of our present reading, ‘delivered into the hands of men’ encompasses all that He had said the first time on this subject.

The term ‘into the hands of men’ is a metaphor for ‘into the power of men.’ Here we are not told who will deliver Jesus into men’s power. Some think that this is a reference to the betrayal by Judas Iscariot. But just as no one could take the life of our Lord (He gave His life for us)⁶ no one could overpower Jesus. Only God Himself could deliver Jesus into the hands of men. However, this was already the plan of God when He became a human being. The Cross was always His goal and destiny.

‘Son of Man’ is the preferred title Jesus used for Himself. It is an allusion to the vision in Daniel 7 in which ‘one like a Son of Man’ coming as God (“with the clouds of Heaven”) receives the eternal kingdom before the throne of God.

But they did not understand the statement,

Luke emphasizes the inability of the disciples to understand what Jesus was talking about. It is not that they did not understand the words; the statement just did not fit into their concept of the future of their King.

and it was concealed from them so that they might not perceive it;

Their minds were blocked to the possibility that He would come to such an end. The term ‘so that’ could be translated two ways: 1) ‘in order that . . .’ or 2) “in such a way that . . .”⁷

If the first possibility is taken, the meaning of Jesus’ statement was concealed from them for a purpose. They would not be allowed to understand it, at least at that time.

If the second possibility is taken, the meaning of Jesus’ statement was blocked in such a way that prevented their understanding. In this instance the blockage was their resistance to this message about Christ’s death. Unbelief is notorious for blinding one to the truth.

⁶ John 10:17-18.

⁷Max Zerwick and Mary Grosvenor, *A Grammatical Analysis of the Greek New Testament* (Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1993) p. 215.

and they were afraid to ask Him about this statement.

Luke does not tell us why the disciples were afraid to ask Jesus about His statement. However, the other synoptic Gospel writers give us a clue. Mark records that the first time Jesus brought up the topic of His death, Jesus was very clear and they understood His meaning. However, Peter “took Him aside and began to rebuke Him. But turning around and seeing His disciples, He [Jesus] rebuked Peter, and said, ‘Get behind Me Satan; for you are not setting your mind on God’s interests, but man’s.’”⁸

Given that this had happened to Peter, no doubt they were afraid of a similar tongue lashing.

They were more comfortable contemplating their bright future. This vision of the glorious kingdom, and their exalted status in it at Jesus’ side, could not tolerate the idea that He might die. Without the king there would be no kingdom and they would be back in their old lowly rank in society.

And an argument arose among them as to which of them might be the greatest.

The disciples’ interests were centered on man’s desires. The glory of the Kingdom and their place in it as Christ’s closest co-workers in His administration captured their fancy and inflated their egos.

The recent distinguishing of Peter, James, and John to witness the raising of Jairus’s daughter and to accompany Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration—though the three never told anyone about their experience there before the Resurrection—probably gave them an idea that one of the three would have the highest status. Peter seemed to be the natural leader, but on the other hand, John liked to refer to himself as “the disciple whom Jesus loved.”

Judas Iscariot as the treasurer for the group probably felt that he already was the most important to Jesus.

But Jesus, knowing what they were thinking in their heart,

The disciples’ thoughts, their hopes and dreams, their jockeying for position as His closest associate, did not escape Jesus. To help them understand God’s perspective of greatness, he gave them an object lesson—an example to illustrate the concept He was about to teach.

took a child and stood him by His side,

A child in the society of that day held the lowest rank of all. Perhaps because of the mortality rate, it was the least regarded of society. Therefore, it was not strange, but normal, that the disciples thought that children should not be brought to an important person like Jesus.⁹

Symbolically, Jesus stood one of these of the lowest rank by His side. The child in society looked down on no one; it could only look up to everyone because everyone was more important than he. This child symbolized the characteristic needed by His closest associate, and therefore the characteristic of the greatest of His disciples.

and said to them, “Whoever receives this child in My name receives Me;

When the head of state sends an ambassador, this representative is accorded all the honor and esteem that the actual head of state would receive.

⁸ Mark 8:32-33. Cf. Matthew 16:21-23.

⁹ Luke 18:15.

To accept Christ means to honor and esteem the child, the symbol in that day of humility and weakness. How we welcome the lowest member of the human race is our welcome of Jesus Christ. If we do not welcome, with esteem, even the least of humanity, we cannot claim to have welcomed Christ.

and whoever receives Me receives Him Who sent Me;

In reality, God the Father has sent His Representative, His Incarnation to us. How we welcome Him is our welcome of the Father.

For he who is least among you, this is the one who is great.”

Here, He demonstrates that God’s view of importance is the very opposite of society’s. The argument of the disciples centered on the question “Which disciple will be the greatest?” In the opinion of God, the person who, like the child, looks down on no one, but respects and honors everyone, is the greatest. That one is great because he has the attitude of Christ Himself. Christ welcomes and esteems everyone. Christ puts the welfare of others before Himself. Witness the Cross.

And John answered and said, “Master, we saw someone casting out demons in Your Name;

John began to apply this new view of status to recent actions of the disciples. Someone had been appropriating the power of Christ to cast out demons and was successful. It will be remembered that although the disciples had once been commissioned to cast out demons, in the most recent case they had been powerless to exorcise the demon possessed boy.

and we tried to hinder him because he does not follow along with us.”

The disciples had tried to stop this man from doing work in the power of God. Why? Because he was not one of the Apostles; he was not one of the elite group; he did not have their status. Therefore they felt the man had no right to do things that, in their opinion, were reserved for their special rank next to the King.

“And John answered” connects this discussion with what has just preceded. In view of what Jesus had just told them about status, John was uncertain about their action and was asking for His ruling.

But Jesus said to him, “Do not hinder him, for he who is not against you is for you.”

Jesus divides the world into two teams. There are those who work for God and there are those who fight God. Just two, there is not a third neutral group. If someone is working in the power of God, he is on God’s team and should not be discouraged.

APPLICATION

There are three lessons in our Gospel reading today that are particularly applicable to our preparation for Advent: 1) The mission of the Incarnation was the humility of the Cross; 2) The mission of Christians is the humility of service; 3) The mission of the Church is the humility of love. Pride and self-exaltation have no place in the kingdom of God.

The mission of the Incarnation was the humility of the Cross

Thanksgiving is almost here and we will soon be caught up in the rush of the holiday season. This Sunday, then, is a good time to reflect, to turn our thoughts once again to the

miracle of Christmas. It was a miracle. A baby boy was born to a virgin. Glorious angels appeared to lowly shepherds. Wealthy kings knelt to worship a child born in a stable.

But these were the results of the miracle. The miracle was a decision. The Creator of Heaven and Earth, the indescribable, the only immortal God decided to save His doomed creation in the only possible way. The exalted, ever living God became a lowly creature in order to die. The poor baby worshipped by the Kings, heralded by the Angelic host, and born to the virgin, was the Incarnate God whose mission was the Cross. He was determined to submit to death for our sakes. He was determined to pay our awful sin penalty. Out of His great love, the Almighty was determined to humble Himself and submit to death—even to death on a Cross. This was the greatest miracle the world will ever know.

The mission of Christians is the humility of service.

In America little children’s eyes sparkle as Christmas approaches. It’s their favorite holiday, filled with lights and music and delicious food and . . . *presents*. It’s hopeless to try to convince them that it is better to give than to receive. Somehow that is *not* their vision of Christmas.

What is our vision of life? Is it better to give than receive? Is it better to serve or be served? Is it better to honor or be honored? If our vision of a successful life is to have power by receiving wealth and prestige and positions of honor and praise, we are very much like the disciples of our reading. And, we are very much *unlike* our God.

If our vision is to reach out to the little people of the earth, those who are poor and needy and helpless and rejected by the high and mighty of the world, to spend and be spent for their sakes, to treasure and esteem them, then, we have learned the ways of our God. To Him we are all poor and needy and helpless and, in the Incarnation, He bent down in love for us. He calls us to humble ourselves and join Him in service for others.

The mission of the Church is the humility of love

There are two times in the year when all churches are packed to overflowing; one of these is Advent. It is a time when all Christian churches celebrate the birth of the Christ Child. Like the Sunday of Holy Easter, it is a time when all the Church universally is united in glorifying our incomparable God. Sadly, this is not true of the rest of the year.

Over the last 1700 years deep divisions have occurred in the universal Church. We each think our way of worship, our way of calculating dates, our special traditions, our interpretation of the Holy Writings are the right ones. We all think that God recognizes our way over their way. It was reported last year that one leader of a major denomination has even asserted that “Orthodox churches were defective and that other Christian denominations were not true churches.”¹⁰

¹⁰ MSNBC News Services updated 8:52 a.m. CT, Tues., July 10, 2007. This article was reported from Lorenzago Di Cadore, Italy, on the release of a document approved by Pope Benedict XVI.

The lesson that we learn from our reading is that such arrogance was not tolerated by our Lord. The man the disciples tried to hinder was not one of the Apostles, yet God honored his work that he did in the Name of Christ. The man could not have cast out demons unless God was working through him. In fact the man was succeeding where the Apostles themselves had recently failed.

While we Armenians treasure our way of worship and our Apostolic heritage,¹¹ may we give serious thought to the only division that Christ recognized, those who were against Him and those who were for Him. If they are for Christ, we are on the same team and are called to respect and love and encourage each other as brothers in Christ. In fact, all believers in Jesus Christ are *commanded* to love each other in the same way that He has loved us, humbly and sacrificially.¹²

If they are against Christ, we must remember that God loved them so much that our Savior died for their sins as well as for ours. He bent down in love for them and we must do so too.

On the eve of this wonderful season of Advent may this Gospel reading inspire us to have the mind of Christ, Who, although (and because) He was the Greatest of the great, took the form of a servant to be born that first Christmas Day. May we, individual Christians as well as the many congregations of Christian Churches, learn to “do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind, regard one another as more important” than ourselves. May God help us to be truly great.

Have a blessed Thanksgiving.

¹¹ For the former Armenian Patriarch’s discussion of the tolerance that the Armenian Church has always exhibited toward other Christian churches see Malachia Ormanian, *The Church of Armenia* (New York: St. Vartan Press, 1988) pp. 110-13.

¹² How far we have strayed from this commandment is, to our great shame, flashed around the world in reports of Armenian and Greek Orthodox monks battling each other over access to the holy sites of Jerusalem.