

Homily Sunday 24B, 16 Sept 2012: HT-W/XII-PC

The new translation of the Roman Missal makes a slight tweak in the wording of the renewal of baptismal promises. It used to ask: Do you reject Satan, and all his works, and all his empty promises. Now the 3rd question asks: Do you reject all his empty show? For some strange reason, those phrases about empty promises and empty show came to mind one morning in the bathroom as I was thinking about political conventions. I watched my first convention in 1980: I have seen my share of them, so I don't make a point to watch them much anymore. Forgive my skepticism, but I feel there is a bit of empty show and a few empty promises in these events. There's lots of pageantry, numerous speeches, and all sorts of assertions about how the party's nominee if elected will usher in the golden age of America. But whoever wins usually turns out different from the fellow advertised at the convention. His ability to steer the course of events is quite limited. He must contend w/ unforeseen crises. Campaign promises succumb to political reality. It's been said: you campaign in poetry, you govern in prose. And so some, perhaps much, of what is talked about at the convention proves to be empty show and empty promises.

All the hype is understandable, somewhat. There is an all too human tendency to seek salvation via the political process. This inclination is especially strong when religious influence diminishes. In our secularized era many felt that God is disengaged from the world; therefore, human beings must take it upon themselves to construct heaven on earth. God helps those who help themselves, as they say, so some are particularly passionate in their politics. Oddly enough, however, there are striking similarities between this modern way of thinking and that of Jesus' contemporaries in the profoundly religious society of ancient Israel. You see, among the Jewish people of the first century, there was not a commonly acknowledged notion of the afterlife; some groups such as the Sadducees denied the resurrection altogether. So religious hopes often focused on a kind of salvation in this world: prosperity, domestic peace, and national security were very much the stuff of messianic expectation. We may find it hard to fathom nowadays when church and state are supposed to be distinct if not separate, but the messiah of which the gospel speaks was in the popular imagination supposed to be a political leader. The messiah, the Christ, was to be a king who would restore the fallen fortunes of the kingdom of Israel. This messiah was to be anointed with the Spirit of the Lord for a political objective, namely that he might deliver the chosen people from the grasp of their hated Roman oppressors and restore the nation to the glory it had enjoyed in the bygone days of Kings David and Solomon. It stands to reason that these notions were shared by Simon Peter and his comrades when he affirmed that Jesus was the messiah, the Christ. So when the Lord began to speak of being rejected by the Jewish leadership, crucified and killed by the pagans, it completely shattered the dreams entertained by the disciples of what the future would be. Small wonder that Peter pulled the Lord aside to rebuke him. Admittedly, Peter was thinking as human beings do--but, dear Lord, how else is a human being supposed to think?

There is a fundamental problem with Peter's way of thinking, and that of our secular contemporaries, well, also that of many worldly-minded Catholics for that matter. The fundamental problem is that their hopes and dreams are too small. You see, God made human beings for eternal life; we bear the stamp of his eternity. So we could never be satisfied with an earthly utopia. Good jobs, a rising standard of living, and secure borders are good, but they're not good enough to meet the deepest desires of the human heart. We require something much more profound and enduring. Really, we require nothing less than a share in God's own life. And that is precisely what Christ comes to give. The cross is necessary--as the Lord emphatically says, he MUST suffer and die--in order that we may share in God's life. This messiah comes not to overthrow earthly overlords; rather, he comes to liberate the human race from sin and death. He offers us something no human politician, however bold, would even dare to promise. This messiah, this Christ comes to share most profoundly in the mystery of our death, that human beings may come to share in the mystery of God's life.

This faith conviction should reshape our engagement with the political process. For starters, our first allegiance is to Jesus Christ, not to a political party or platform or program. Christ offers us something much greater than any earthly ruler could dream of, but he also demands the supreme degree of commitment--losing one's life for his sake, if need be. It's hard to imagine today's pandering politicians echoing JFK's famous line "Ask not what your country can do for you, but ask what you can do for your country!" Much less are they likely to demand sacrifices from their constituents. But self-denial for the sake of Jesus Christ, even to the point of martyrdom if necessary, is expected of faithful Catholics. Secondly, we should look to Christ and his teachings to guide our involvement in governing our nation, whether we simply are voters or are more deeply involved as government officials ourselves. The Lord does expect his faithful to make a difference in the world--that's what the corporal works of mercy are all about. Governments have a responsibility to protect the fundamental rights of human beings and foster the common good of society; Catholics have a responsibility to help governments do this; and when governments fail in this regard, we have a duty to call them to account. Part of rendering to Caesar or Uncle Sam is letting Caesar know what God expects of him, even when Caesar is disinclined to listen. Let's pray that during this election year the Spirit of Christ will fill our hearts and minds, that we may be both faithful Catholics and faithful citizens.