

Purgatory
28th Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)
(Mk 10:17-30)

At the time of death when the soul comes into the presence of God it faces its “particular judgment,” whether it will be with God in heaven, or separated from God in hell. This determination is made based on the state of grace. If the soul dies in a state of (mortal) sin, it will not enter the heavenly kingdom.

Mortal sin is determined primarily by the Ten Commandments. One loses the state of grace by freely (willfully) transgressing a commandment in a serious way. Thus, when the young man asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life, Jesus replies, “keep the commandments,” and when the young man indicates that he has, Jesus looks upon him with love (Mk 10:21). This indicates the state of grace.

Faithfully observing the Ten Commandments will keep one out of hell, but it is not enough for heaven. One thing more is necessary for heaven: “*Go, sell what you have, and give to the poor...*” (Mk 10:21). For heaven, love must be perfect, which means God must be loved above everything else. It is not enough to keep the commandments, one must also be purified from all *attachment* to sin, all attachment to things, to the world, and even to people.

I recall seeing pictures of heaven in which the artist shows a large city full of angels and saints, with a large gate open in welcome to the saved. The book of Revelation indeed depicts heaven as a great city with high walls comprised of jewels and living stones, with twelve “pearly” gates (cf. Rv 21:9-21). But the artist was incorrect in depicting gate as large and wide open.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus describes the kingdom of hell as having the large gate, and the road to hell as a broad highway. But the “*gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life*” (Mt 7:13-14). The twelve gates of heaven, twelve pearls, are very small and hard to pass into. This is the significance of the “needle’s eye.” It is a small, narrow opening in a city wall used when the main entrances have to be sealed up due to threat of attack. A man must bow low in order to squeeze through, one at a time.

Can a camel pass through a “needle’s eye”? The answer is yes, but not without quite some difficulty. Camels are pack animals. In order to get a camel through this gate, all the baggage must be stripped off, the camel must be brought down onto its knees and its head bowed down. Then it must be pulled, shoved, cajoled, and squeezed through on its haunches, not without scrapes, bruises, and protest at the sting of the whip. It cannot get through by itself, but with the forceful help of others a camel can pass through a needle’s eye.

Jesus says of those who are attached to the things of the world: “*it is easier for a camel to pass through a needle’s eye, than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God!*” (Mt 10:25). Purgatory is the painful and difficult process by which the soul which is destined for heaven, is purified of all attachment to sin that kept it from being perfect in the love of God. Only the soul that is fully free and stripped of worldly baggage can rest in God’s peace in heaven.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, “*Blessed are the poor in spirit; blessed are the meek, blessed are those who mourn...*” (cf. Mt 5:1-8). God often permits us to experience difficulties while in the world, particularly the experience of loss, in order to purify us for heaven. The loss can be possessions, people, or even the health of our body. When the world and its riches no longer have any attraction for us, it is easier to leave it behind, and the process of passing through the needle eye of Purgatory is not so painful.

The perfect representative of the imperfect soul is the rich young man. While he wishes to be good, he is not able to love God above all things. On the other hand, the apostles represent those who are willing to leave behind the world completely (Mk 10:29-30) in order to love God above all things.

Last week the Church celebrated the memorial of St. Francis of Assisi, another rich young man who took to heart the words of the Lord, and loved God above all things. He sold all his possessions and gave them to the poor, then lived as a poor man for the rest of his life, so that he could pass immediately to heaven upon his death. He also renounced the dysfunctional relationship with his controlling father, who sought a court order to prevent him from living the life of a poor disciple. Francis left behind home, father, brothers, sisters, and children in order to seek the Kingdom of God, and was blessed in turn by the Lord a hundred-fold, with brothers, sisters, children, spiritual riches (including the suffering of stigmata) and persecutions, and eternal life in the age to come.

Most of us are not such saints. We are more like the rich young man who wish to follow the Lord wholeheartedly, but fall short. We try to keep the Commandments, yet our love is weakened by sloth, avarice, and gluttony. When we die, we are not poor like St. Francis, but often leave behind a mess of possessions, and an even greater tangle of imperfect relationships. Getting into heaven is still possible, but only with the help of God and the Church, and a painful process of purification.

It is for this reason we pray for the dead, and offer Masses and other prayers and penances for them. When someone dies, their attachments are revealed. Those whom they left behind can help them rest in peace. We must remember and pray for the dead. God gives the Church a role in helping these souls “get into

heaven.” At the same time, when we help our departed loved ones, our own souls become more purified, because we recognize more clearly how the love of God must be above all things, especially the vanity of the world. The time of mourning is a holy and sacred time for the soul in Purgatory, but also for those on earth who are still striving for more perfect discipleship.

As we come up to the month of November and the Commemoration of All Souls (November 2), let us remember the dead, and be inspired to let go of worldly attachments in a deeper way. Let us prepare ourselves, like St. Francis and the saints, to leave this world in peace, and go quickly to God in the heavenly city.