

3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time B (January 21, 2024 STM: 5:15, 7:30, 11:15)

Fr. Bryan Massengale, a professor at Fordham, in speaking to seminarians on preaching said this: "Men, the worst thing someone can tell you after a Sunday homily is, 'Nice homily, Father.' Because the Gospel isn't nice. Make them glad, make them sad, make them mad, but don't make them feel nice."

My dear sisters and brothers in Christ Jesus, I heard it said that the best test of preaching is not, "Father, that was a nice sermon," but rather "Father, I can't wait to get out of here and put this into practice. I'm not only going to take these words to heart, but also to put them into my hands, my feet and my wallet and live as if the Kingdom of God has already dawned." That would be great. That is what this is all about. That is what Jesus came to do. That is why Jesus preached. Jesus was a good homilist. I wonder if, after hearing Jesus preach the Semon on the Mount, people walked up to him and said "Nice Sermon, Jesus." Jesus did not come to preach some sort of vague, feel-good spirituality. He came to get people to sign up. To sign up to follow him. To be fishers of men. He came to make disciples.

Jesus was the ultimate homilist and his the model for all of us who undertake this work each day. What I do is to preach to you and to myself. A homilist is having a good day if he gets people to think about what he is saying. The homilist is having an even better day if he gets people to do something about what he has said. Jesus did not want people to just think about what he was saying. He wanted people to do something about it. He wanted people to come into this new way of life that he was offering. It was a life of following him with their whole heart, soul and mind. Today he invites James and John to leave all they knew-and to leave their father-and come and follow Him. They would leave their fishing nets behind and catch people. I always wondered what Zebedee-their father-thought of this. He was left in the boat holding the nets. So much for the "Zebedee and Sons Fishing Company." When Jesus called, it was as such a strong invitation that people would leave all they knew to go with him.

As disciples today, we are asked to perhaps not leave behind family, although maybe you want to. But we are asked to forsake everything that is contrary to the gospel to follow Jesus. This is what the disciple does-he or she gets rid of those things in life which hinder a relationship with the teacher. Much of this involves the call to repentance. We often think of repentance in terms of doing penance, giving up things. But there is more to it. Perhaps no one has described the persistence of God and our resistance to Him more effectively than Francis Thompson, in his great poem, THE HOUND OF HEAVEN. He wrote:

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him down the arches of the years...
I fled from Him down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind...
I hid from Him, and under running laughter...
From those strong Feet that followed, followed after."

You see, God wants us, and he wants ALL of us. Jesus wanted all of Simon and Andrew, James and John. Jesus wants our heart, soul and mind. He wants us to give him our all. And he will keep coming after us-the hound of heaven-pursuing us until we finally give in, until we allow ourselves to be found.

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Frederick Buechner, says that "To repent is to come to your senses. It is not so much something you do as something that happens. True repentance spends less time looking at the past and saying, 'I'm sorry,' than to the future and saying 'Wow!'" (WISHPFUL THINKING, p. 79) You see, we can stop worrying about our past when we allow ourselves to be found by the hound of heaven. We can simply look to the future and all that this means for us-a life with and in Christ. We can stare deep within the confines of our soul and see what is disordered and bring that to the surface, repent from it and then live life differently. This is the past we are asked to leave behind as those who follow Jesus today.

Jesus called Simon and Andrew, James and John to follow him, to leave all they knew in the past. He was offering them an exciting new way of life. So powerful were the words of Jesus and his life-for the best homily is the one we preach with our way of life-that these fishermen chose to leave their boats and their nets, their family behind for the sake of being with Jesus, learning from him, trying to become more and more like him.

Our task, the task of discipleship is the same. We are meant to be molded, formed more and more into the very image and likeness of Christ. Hopefully the words you hear preached from this pulpit on Sunday help you to do that. Hopefully you are thinking about the words we homilists preach. Hopefully you are doing something about it too.

A story to end.

An old preacher was dying. He sent a message for his banker and his lawyer, both church members, to come to his home.

When they arrived, they were ushered up to his bedroom. As they entered the room, the preacher held out his hands and motioned for them to sit on each side of the bed. The preacher grasped their hands, sighed contentedly, smiled, and stared at the ceiling. For a time, no one said anything.🕒

Both the banker and lawyer were touched and flattered that the preacher would ask them to be with him during his final moments. They were also puzzled; the preacher had never given them any indication that he particularly liked either of them. They both remembered his many long, uncomfortable sermons about greed, covetousness, and avaricious behavior that made them squirm in their seats.

Finally, the banker said, "Preacher, why did you ask us to come?"

The old preacher mustered up his strength and then said weakly, "Jesus died between two thieves, and that's how I want to go.

With my apologies to any bankers and lawyers in our midst today.

So, on the way out, you can still say "Nice homily, Father." But you can also say "I'll do something about it." Amen.