

12th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year "A"

Do not be afraid of living for God

Early this week a classmate shared a story on our WhatsApp forum titled "A COUNTRY WITH NO VALUES." According to the unknown author of the story, "in 1917 a British lieutenant general Sir Fredrick Stanley Maude was tasked to conquer Baghdad. Upon arrival in Iraq he came across a shepherd and his herd in a field, he asked his translator to offer a shilling to the shepherd and ask him to slaughter his dog.

A dog is very important companion to a shepherd. It warns him of all impending dangers and guards the herd from wolves and thieves, but at that time, with a shilling one could buy half a herd.....

The shepherd agreed to the deal, grabbed his dog and slaughtered it at the feet of the general.

General Maude said to the shepherd, "I'll give you an additional shilling to skin the dog!

The shepherd took the shilling and skinned the dog. Then the General offered the third shilling to cut the dog into quarters.

The shepherd took the shilling and chopped the dog. Now the shepherd told the General that for a fourth shilling, he would eat the dog, to which the general answered: "I wanted to learn about your values in this country, and I discovered that you slaughtered, skinned and chopped your most trusted friend and companions for three shilling!

You were even ready to eat it for an additional one....That's all I needed to learn about your country!"

Then he addressed his soldiers and said, "As long as this kind of mentality prevails in this country and you can buy anyone, don't fear anything and no one!" Since that time and until our days, in that part of the world, officials have sold their countries, their people, their friends, their honor and their principles for a house in Europe and bank account in Switzerland."

What is said about Baghdad could be said of any country, Christians, person or politician. Are we any different from that shepherd? Are present day Christians any different from the shepherd in Baghdad, Iraq and other parts of the world?

When Jesus says in today's gospel "do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather, be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in Gehenna." Jesus is inviting us to live for higher values. Jesus understands fully well how difficult it is to live a good and holy life. If being good is easy, every person will be good. It is always hard to live for values that are not self-serving.

The prophet Jeremiah was a good man. He tried his utmost best to live a good and upright life in a society corrupted by idolatry (worship of false gods) and an excess quest for material things. His love for God did not gain him any immunity from persecution. Disgrace and public persecution was his lot for challenging the status quo. But we see the greatness of Jeremiah in the fact that he did not give up on God. Even in the midst of opposition, rancor and persecution, Jeremiah was able to stand for kingdom values.

In the life of Jeremiah we see a good example of what Jesus is telling us in the gospel today about living for values that liberate and transform the world. Jesus wants us to focus more on eternal values that endure forever – truth, beauty, justice, goodness and respect for all. Deep within our hearts we welcome and cherish these eternal values but when it comes to acting on them, our desire for self-preservation and self-glorification trumps the courage to stand for and even be willing to die for what we believe.

We want to live for God but when it comes to speaking the truth, we prefer what benefits my race, tribe or ethnicity to what makes for justice for all. We are much more prone to protecting the values that benefit our political party to what serves the common good. We choose what makes for a profitable and successful business transaction over truth, honesty and fair play. We even go as far as convincing ourselves and others that it is the right thing to do.

The greatest obstacle to living according to kingdom values is fear. Of course we need an element of fear in life to put a check on the virtue of

courage, especially the fear of sin and respect for others. However, whenever one's life is dominated by fear, it weakens our inborn desire to stand up for kingdom values in the world.

The recipe for overcoming fear is love and the constant awareness that God is with us and that God cares about us – “even all the hairs of your head are counted. You are worth more than a sparrow.” Living and dying for God is a noble thing to do. It is the best choice anyone could make in the world. Jesus attests to this when He says “Everyone who acknowledges me before others I will acknowledge before my heavenly Father.” The radical option for God entails that in any situation we find ourselves we make a conscientious effort to choose good and avoid evil.

We do not need any special power or academic knowledge to be able to choose good. Doing good is a natural option for any human being with intellect and will. The good news is that the human conscience has an innate power for good, but with constant refusal to live for and choose what is good we begin to lose the ordinary power of doing good in a natural way devoid of coercion.

Jesus does not make light of the consequences of doing evil – refusal to live for God. “But whoever denies me before others, I will deny before my heavenly Father.” This is probably one of the strongest statements made by Jesus concerning anyone with intellect and will living a life that does not contribute to the civilization of love in the world. Such an option has consequences, the greatest of which is the loss of the support we get from Jesus interceding for us before God in heaven, which means you are on your own.

It is okay to be alone in the world but having no one to intercede for us before God is something no one should wish for. In essence, doing good in the world is not an optional choice. It is a necessary condition of fulfilling the purpose for which we were created. The fundamental question before us today is “what purpose do I serve in the world? What values do I live for? What are the effects of my choices on others? What will people miss when I am gone?”