

BULLETIN -- OCTOBER 11

Squaring mercy with redemption. “Okay, I get it, Father,” the big bruiser at the bar told me one Pulaski weekend some years ago. He went on, somewhat surprisingly considering his general demeanor, “I mean, I know that I’m enough of a sinner that there’s no way I can save myself. All I can do is get up, try again, and rely on God’s mercy. In fact, I pray the Divine Mercy chaplet every day, and find great comfort in it.”

That was the surprise. Here was a guy whose big biceps were covered with tattoos, looking like he could have been a bouncer at a motorcycle club. And he was in a heart-to-heart conversation with a priest, talking about the mercy of God. But then he offered a question. “What I can’t figure out, Father, is why God the Father, if he’s so merciful, demands the shedding of his Son’s Blood to pay the price? If God is so merciful, why does he have to be bought off or appeased?”

I was glad we were only on our first beer. This could take some time, and certainly some clarity of thought. His was a troubling misconception shared by many. Many others don’t even bother to think about it. “There was a debt to be paid, and so Christ paid it,” they say glibly. But if Christ can tell parables about debts that are *forgiven* by a merciful master, why could not *this* debt be similarly forgiven? Why can God in his infinite mercy just say, “Oh well, people will be people,” forgive us seventy times seven times, and get on with it. Why subject his innocent Son to the torture which we deserve for our sins?

I’ve grappled with the question myself, and have come to the conclusion that it’s not God who needs to be bought off. WE need to be bought off. WE SINNERS need to be shown the immense cost of our sins. WE need to be confronted with the enormity of our sins and the magnificence of God’s free grace and forgiveness. And God, graphic artist that he is, does more than paint us a picture on canvas. He paints it in his own Flesh and Blood on the cross.

I don’t mean that Christ’s sacrifice is directed to us rather than to the Father. On the cross, Christ, the Son of God in the flesh, does in the flesh what he does within the Trinity for all eternity. God’s love is an infinite mutual outpouring and receiving, so strong and powerful between Father and Son that the very outpouring and receiving of the divine persons, the bond that unites Father and Son, is itself the Third Person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit. We were created in that divine image to share in God’s own life. In the persons of our first parents, we chose to make ourselves like God *on our own terms* rather than God’s. That same folly continued when the peoples of the world got together to build the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11. “Let’s get to heaven on our own terms!” we exclaim with blind arrogance, every time we reject God’s commandments and substitute our own whims and fancies. And the result, *actual sin*, is always the same. Communication breaks down, our fine projects come to naught, and we blame God for giving us free will. “Why would a good God create us so that we could commit sin?” we cry in anguish. See why we need to be “bought” back and brought back to a clear vision of God’s love?

The cumulative weight of human sin would crush us. That’s why Christ took it upon himself to the cross. We had to be “bought off,” *redeemed*, not because it was demanded by an angry God who had to be appeased. In the pagan imagination, their gods had to be bought off by acts of degradation and violence up to and including human

sacrifice. That's not our God, the true God, the one God. We repeat: Christ, the Son of God, does in the flesh what the Son of God does from all eternity. He offers himself TO God the Father in eternal sacrifice; but now, on the cross and in the Eucharist, he mercifully involves us in his offering. The offering is TO God, but FOR us. Christ pays the price, not to an angry, vengeful God, but to show to us the lengths to which God is willing to go to repair the damage caused by our sins, to "buy us back," as it were, from the wicked foolishness of our sins.

Examine again the words of consecration in the Eucharistic prayer. "This is my Body, which will be given up FOR YOU. . . This is the chalice of my Blood, the Blood of the new and eternal covenant, which will be poured out FOR YOU AND FOR MANY FOR THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS." God does not have to be convinced to love us. God does not have to have his mind changed about us. WE in our stubbornness and attachment to sin have to be convinced; and in the act of redemption on the cross, God shows us what love looks like. That's why I've never understood how anyone could be upset at Ephesians 5 ("Wives, be submissive to your husbands, etc.") when it contains the line, "Husbands, love your wives AS CHRIST LOVED THE CHURCH." If we understood the full implications of THAT sentence, the rest of the passage should not trouble us in the least. What a challenge for men, married, celibate, or single!

All this is nonsense to those who choose not to surrender to faith in God--and it IS a surrender, as anyone who "practices" the faith knows! We practice and practice, trying to get it right. The insanity of the world around us, the increasing number of people who are disaffected, disappointed, disheveled, and disordered--all these are predictable. Whether with brick and mortar or with music or with art or with laws or with weapons or with empty eloquence, when we try to build our own way to paradise, we are doomed to fail. "Insanity," it's been famously said, "is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results."

I am well aware that I very easily could have become a complete moral relativist. Insofar as I am a sinner, I am at least occasionally an *incomplete* moral relativist! By some action of God's grace and mercy, I've never trusted my own judgment enough to find myself free of sin. For that reason, I've always been wary of those who advertise that they know better than others how best to live life. It's what has sent the antennae up, from my days studying Marxism in college, through the quirky liturgical aberrations of the 1970's, through my associations with community organizers in a number of cities. When I hear certain politicians proclaim their agenda, it's like the familiar echo of the rabble-rousers I went to school with, claiming that there is no way of knowing truth, "bending" whatever truth they accept to suit their own purposes, rejecting any classical, traditional, or religious concept of family or society, and anxious to achieve power so that they can transform everything in a glorious revolution of "fairness" and "equality." When you consider the notion of God to be a bizarre holdover from a world of long ago, to whom else can you turn but to the idol of your own making? Certain politicians try to convince us that if we just give up our time-honored principles and revealed truths, they can fashion for us a paradise on earth. The moral elites try to convince us that if we just surrender to them everything we treasure, a Golden Calf will come out. And that's a lot of bull. God bless you!

Fr. Den

Thought for the week: “Treat people as if they were what they ought to be, and you help them to become what they are capable of being” (Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, 1749-1832, German writer and statesman).