

8th Wednesday in Ordinary Time
March 2, 2011
Fr. Joe Bambenek
Cathedral of St. Matthew the Apostle, Washington DC

Text in maroon font omitted from preached homily for the sake of brevity

Sirach 36:1, 4-5a, 10-17

Psalm 79

Mark 10:32-45

One of the temptations of Christianity is to fall into the prosperity gospel trap: the errant belief that if we follow Jesus we will experience great success, great riches, and no suffering on Earth in addition to celebrating eternity with God in heaven. Sometimes Earthly prosperity does happen when we live Christian lives. In some ways, that should not be a surprise, for when we follow Christ, we are living in keeping with how God created us to live. Yet we live in a fallen world; a world in which there is selfishness; a world in which easy success seems to happen more often when we don't follow the gospel than when we do; a world in which money is often easier to make when we are not bound by the limitation of loving God and loving neighbor before ourselves. And even if being Christian always led to worldly success, it is clear that at the core of Jesus' message is one of love, not of success.

The fact that some in our day fall into the prosperity gospel trap should not be surprising, because in today's gospel reading we hear that two of Jesus' very closest followers fell into it themselves. It is quite stunning to think about it: James and John, as two of the 3 or 4 most intimate friends of Jesus, at the time when Jesus is talking about how He is about to suffer and die for us, are caught up in the worldly glory they expect that following Jesus will give them. The message of Jesus: of self-sacrificial love, of forgiveness, and of humble service, not Earthly riches and glory, had not yet sunk in despite them being close to Jesus for so long. We can ask ourselves today how deeply it has sunk into our minds and hearts?

As I reflected upon this gospel, I realized how fitting it is for the reason I am here to celebrate Mass with you today. [As I mentioned at the start of Mass], my name is Fr. Joe Bambenek. I was ordained a priest of the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis last May. I have come to this beautiful cathedral today to celebrate with you a Mass of Thanksgiving for my ordination because about a decade ago I travelled on business to Washington, DC with very frequent, almost weekly regularity. Especially in 1999 and 2000, the years during which I was most intensely struggling with discerning the call to the priesthood, I often started my day by attending the Cathedral's 7 AM Mass.

When I first started coming to Washington, DC, it was almost like a fairy tale for me to be walking among all the great buildings of our nation. And when I would come to the Cathedral, it was the same. In fact, I was much more like James and John than I would like to admit. For instance, I remember getting tingly inside when I would come forward to receive Holy Communion and stand in the spot marking where President Kennedy's casket laid during his funeral. That statement in itself perhaps casts light on my internal priorities of the eternal and Earthly, on how deeply today's gospel message had not yet sunk in for me.

Yet as I reflect back, what I remember most, and what I gained the most from all those Masses for my current life as a priest, was much less naturally glorious. What I gained had much more to do with humility, one of the unnatural virtues which ultimately bring true life. In fact, let me quickly share with you the biggest three lesson-laden memories from my experiences in

this Cathedral. And I promise it will be quick since I know that many of you are on your way home from a long day of work.

The first lesson is that back in the late 90s a group of people would stay after 7 AM Mass to pray Morning Prayer from the Liturgy of the Hours. To the uninitiated, these are complicated prayers. Yet when I was ordained I made a solemn promise to pray these prayers for the rest of my life. Learning the system is hard, and it was frustrating and humbling, if not humiliating to try and pray after Mass with the group here, but by doing so, I was ultimately, and unknowingly, preparing myself for the lifetime commitment I would make 10 years later. *In fact, we priests often say that our breviary, the book in which the Liturgy of the Hours are contained, is our wife. As I was reflecting upon it in preparation for this homily it dawned on me that learning the intricacies and complexities of the Liturgy of the Hours is a lot like what a newly married husband or wife must do in terms of learning the intricacies and complexities of his or her new spouse.*

Second, following one of the rare times when I attended this 5:30 PM Cathedral evening Mass, I noticed that there was a young woman praying. I felt convicted in my heart that there was a message of affirmation and encouragement that God wanted me to give her. *[In particular, to walk up to her, hand her a rose while telling her that God has answered her prayer, and to walk away].* However, it seemed far too bizarre for me as a stranger to approach her like that, and so I chickened out. With time, as I came to better understand how God uses people as His messengers, His angels on Earth you could say, it became clear that I really missed the boat by failing to make that act of kindness... and so I have resolved not to make the same mistake again of missed encouragement. Especially since I believe that encouragement is supposed to be a particular charism of my priesthood. It is all the more unfortunate that I chickened out since it was others approaching me time and time again, encouraging me to become a priest, that played a significant role in my willingness to ultimately say yes to God.

Finally, my last visit to the Cathedral was 5 or 6 years ago. Rather than for Mass, this visit was to receive the Sacrament of Penance. For obvious reasons, I won't get into the details, but it was one of the most meaningful and transforming confessions I have experienced. A powerful reminder that when we humble ourselves and turn our sins over to the one who died for us, He gives us, in turn, life-giving freedom and great joy.

Since I have probably rambled on too long, let me close by expressing my gratitude to the Cathedral parish for the role that my attending Mass here played in my discerning the call to priesthood... and for the lessons I learned in the process that helped prepare me for the priesthood... as well as to Msgr. Jameson for allowing me to celebrate this Mass today and to Fr. Hurley for his kind hospitality. My prayer is that all of us here today will be open to God's voice, and that as we leave the Cathedral this evening, let us do so ever more committed to living lives of humility, forgiveness and life-giving and sacrificial love; avoiding the alluring trap of the prosperity gospel.