

June 17, 2018 Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time (Father's Day)

Bishop Bradley's Reflections on the Sunday Readings

Yesterday I had the joy of celebrating two different Confirmation Masses at Holy Angels Parish in Sturgis, during which I confirmed 20 young people in the morning Mass and 22 young people in the afternoon Mass. Both were truly festive and joyful celebrations. It took a little more than an hour to drive there, and of course another hour to drive back to Kalamazoo, and since it was such a beautiful day, I took two different routes going and returning. Both routes took me through the beautiful rural countryside of our Diocese. It was so enjoyable to see the acres and acres of fields, which have come alive with growth of all kinds of fruits and vegetables. The last time I was on those same roads, the fields were barren. Now, with the seeds having been carefully planted and tended over these last many weeks, and with the help of the huge portable irrigations systems to provide the water essential for life, the corn stalks are nearly two feet out of the ground, while all the other various vines, shoots and stalks are maturing as well. I couldn't help but think of the Scripture Readings for this Eleventh Sunday of the Year which points to the world of nature---the trees and fields and seeds---as a way to help explain for us the Kingdom of God.

In today's Gospel passage from St. Mark, Jesus tells us two parables. In the first, He says: "*This is how it is with the kingdom of God. It is as if a man were to scatter seed on the land and would sleep and rise night and day and, through it all, the seed would sprout and grow, he knows not how.*" How true that is. Just as I was pleasantly surprised to see the fields, not long ago barren, but now alive with growth, so too that happens with each of us as well. I found myself praying for all those who dedicate their lives to working the fields for the well-being of so many of us, and giving thanks to God for what we hope will be a plentiful harvest.

Since today is Father's Day, I think it's safe to say that fathers (and mothers too) don't actually see their children grow, day in and day out; and yet, periodically, they must be taken aback when they realize that growth is in fact taking place right before their eyes. Perhaps that's why so many homes have the measuring walls where each child marks his/her growth every year as a record of the fact that each year they have grown taller and in every other way. Even though fathers/mothers can not actually see their children grow, any more than we can see the corn stalks grow, it is every parent's responsibility (and privilege) to provide all that it takes to help their child(ren) to grow, physically, spiritually, emotionally and intellectually. But, as Jesus said, "*...through it all, the seed (a.k.a. the children) sprout and grow, he knows not how*". We rejoice when our children grow and develop, and we celebrate their accomplishments, such as yesterday's Confirmation celebrations at Holy Angels Parish in Sturgis.

Jesus also told a second parable about the mustard seed which, as He told us, "*is the smallest of all the seeds on the earth, but once it is sown, it springs up and becomes the largest of shrubs.*"

Today's Readings are about growth, development, and responding to the good and loving care which our devoted fathers and mothers provide for us in our families. The comparison, of course, is so clear to the care and providence of our Loving God for all of us. God has given each of us the gift of life and He has planted within each of us the "seed" of His life/grace through our Baptism. While we do grow in this world as human beings, and we hope and pray, that our lives produce a rich harvest as we grow and develop in our lives, the fact is

that when we are fully grown---when we are completely ripe---our destiny is to live with God, we hope and pray, forever in Heaven. And so, while each of us grows in our own uniqueness, our common “calling” that God gives to all of us is to grow in holiness---to grow in love for God and for neighbor---to grow in our ability to live our lives in God’s ways.

Today’s Scripture Readings, then, remind us of something that Pope Francis recently decided to write the whole Church about in his Apostolic Exhortation entitled “*Gaudete et Exsultate*”, which is Latin for “Rejoice and Be Glad”, with the subtitle: “On the universal call to holiness in today’s world”. In that beautiful Letter (which is well worth your reading), Pope Francis tries to help us to understand what “holiness” means, as well as what it doesn’t mean. Our Holy Father tells us: “*To be holy does not require being a bishop, a priest or a religious....We are all called to be holy by living our lives with love and by bearing witness (to God’s Love) in everything we do, wherever we find ourselves.*” (#14) If you notice, the Pope doesn’t tell us that we must spend hours on end in church or at prayer to be holy; we are “called” to live our lives to the best of our ability loving God and loving our neighbor, as Jesus commanded us to do, and, in Pope Francis’ words, “*by bearing witness (to God’s Love) in everything we do, wherever we find ourselves.*” That’s pretty open-ended; “everything we do” includes, well, everything. We should always be trying to be doing what is right, just and thoughtful, in the example of Jesus. And the more we do that, the more spiritually mature we are---the more we “grow” in God’s Love.

In today’s Second Reading, St. Paul helps us to realize why we are called to do so, and what the consequences are. He tells us: “*We walk by faith, not by sight.*” He goes on to tell us that while we are each living in our homes in this world, we are not actually “at home”; we will only actually be “at home” when we are with God. As St. Paul says: “*...although we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord....Yet, we are courageous.*” A little later, St. Paul gives us our motivation: “*For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ.*” We have been given life in this world, and we are “called” to live our lives as well as we possibly can, making the best use of the gifts that God has given us. We are called to yield a fruitful harvest in our lives. But, “*we walk by faith, not by sight*”, and we live our lives as “*courageously*” as we can, giving witness to God’s Love in our lives to all the world around us to the very best of our ability.

On this Father’s Day, we pray for all our fathers, living and deceased. We know that among all the various gifts we might try to give our fathers to symbolize our love and gratitude for their love and guidance, the very best gift we can give them is to live our lives with as much integrity and respect as we can, and to be the best person we can possibly be. Our Loving God and Father is no different. He watches us with love every moment of our lives, and He experiences such great joy and pride in us when we grow in His love, and give witness to that Love to others along the way of our pilgrimage through life. Let us continue to “*be courageous...and walk by faith, not by sight*” until we are finally “*at home*” with our Loving Father in Heaven.

God bless you, now and always!

Faithfully yours in Christ,

+ Bishop Paul J. Bradley