

Sermon by Bishop David L. Moyer

Pentecost XXIV - October 26, 2008

The Church of the Good Shepherd, Rosemont, PA

+In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.

“And no one was able to answer him a word, nor from that day did any one dare to ask him any more questions” (*St. Matthew 22:46*).

Many times during our Lord's earthly ministry people would ask him questions to learn something, to learn more of something, or to have something clarified. Many times also questions were put to Jesus by his opponents to trap him, or to prove that He wasn't a keeper of the Law, or that He wasn't who He said He was or who the people increasingly claimed him to be.

In the Gospel today, we pick up after the Sadducees, the Jewish party of teachers who didn't believe in any form of resurrection, had tried to trap Jesus in making statements that were anti-resurrection in order to bolster their position. They had used the hypothetical of a woman being widowed seven times by seven brothers who had successively married her in obedience to the Law. Jesus countered their question, “In the resurrection, therefore, to which of the seven will she be wife? For they all had her?” with the answer, “You are wrong, because you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven.”

Today it is the rival team's turn - the Pharisees, who try to see what Jesus thinks to be the greatest commandment in the Law. He answers them in a summary fashion with a profound theological and moral teaching in it. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, you shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets.” Clear orthodox teaching with the challenge to love one's neighbour as oneself while loving God.

Then Jesus asked them a question about Himself. “What do you think of the Christ? Whose son is he?” The Pharisees answered, “The son of David.” Then Jesus asked them, “How is it then that David, inspired by the Spirit, calls him Lord, saying, 'The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand, till I put thy enemies under thy feet?' If David thus calls him Lord, how is he his son?” And there were no answers, and no more questions.

Jesus wanted the Pharisees, who were so upset and outraged as to whom He claimed to be and who the crowds claimed Him to be, to go back into their own history to see what King David himself stated and thus prophesied.

Many times we need to go back in order to go forward. We need to go back and own our sins to move forward free from them. We need to go back into the history of the Church to understand the present day church. We need to go back to basics in order to move forward with the more complicated challenges in a myriad of arenas in life such as in art and music.

I realized that in order for me to tell the story that needed to be told to the Jury last week, I needed to go back to 2002, and especially to the six month period of “Inhibition” from the time the fax arrived on March 1st to the letter of “Deposition” that arrived by fax on September 5th. I didn't want to go back to that time because it was an awful time. I didn't want to relive the emotional distress, anguish, fears, and concerns. But I needed to go back there in order to retrieve the truth of what happened to me in terms of deception and what the deception bore in so many personal, familial, and congregational areas.

In the aftermath of the shock of Friday afternoon's Verdict, as I drove home with Rita and John Lewis in the car (all three of us in silence as we drove through Bridgeport from Norristown), I thought of the past and future. Back and forth my brain would go, and that continued for the rest of the day into the evening as I sat in the Rectory library staring at the fire in the fireplace.

I went back and asked myself, “What should or could have been done differently on so many levels?” And I went forward to, “What does this now mean for Rita and me, and for us?” I came to the conclusion (and I pray you own this as I do) that nothing should or could have been done differently if I and you wanted to stand up for the Lord and His Church for ourselves, for our children, and for our children's children; and if all I ever wanted to do was to be obedient to my ordination vows, and for you and me to glorify God. I came to the conclusion for the future that I and you need to do what we do, and that is to grow in our knowledge and love of God, follow Jesus, be led by the Holy Spirit, and to trust in God all the time. As they say in Africa, “God is good all the time.”

My mind went back in order to go forward with what the Jesuit priest led me to meditate on during my five day silent retreat before consecration as a bishop in February of 2005: the words of the Lord to Jeremiah, “For I know the plans I have for you . . . plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon me and come to pray to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me; when you seek me with all your heart.” Monica gave me a consecration gift of a small brass sailboat on a marble stand for my desk after the big Service we had here. On the boat's sail are etched these words from the Book of Jeremiah which Monica did not know had been assigned to me for my retreat.

God knows the plans He has for us. We don't. He is God, and we are not.

I thought I would win in Court. I really did, and most of you did. (And, as David O'Reilly correctly reported in yesterday's Inquirer, the Jury never had the opportunity to deliberate on the charge of fraud committed by Charles Bennison against me). But Rita and I said to each other throughout the week, whether I win or lose, we would trust in the Providence of God.

A large amount of money was put towards this lawsuit from our parish endowment, from a wealthy friend of Forward in Faith in San Diego, and from so many of you. Prayers have been constant for six years from you and from our supporters globally day and night, intensifying last week in the Lady Chapel by those of you who were able to be here, and from those who couldn't be here from your homes and workplaces throughout the week. The E-mails flooded in assuring me of the masses and prayers being offered by bishops and priests in many parts of the world.

I lost the case, but God was glorified in what was said in the Courtroom by John Lewis, Dr. Lander, Rita, and me, and He was glorified by those who sat through the trial's five days offering their love, support, and prayers.

God has received all of this as a fragrant offering of our love. God takes our faith and prayers and uses them in His plans and in His ways, that as the Prophet Isaiah says, are so often not our ways.

The life of this wonderful parish continues and moves forward. We must all stand ready to meet and respond to what comes to us - the challenges, the calls, the grace, the blessings, and the privilege to go deeper in faith, love, fellowship, witness, and service.

There's a folk song that has the refrain, "I have decided to follow Jesus, no turning back, no turning back." We only turn back to remember the goodness of God and what He did in Christ Jesus for our health and salvation.

We must be free to express our deepest feelings because we are human as Jesus was fully human while being fully divine. We grieve, we have fears, we are unsettled, to name a few human emotions. But as you give those emotions freedom to be real, remember that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

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