

5th Sunday in OT + 4 Feb 2024 + Job 7:1-4, 6-7 + I Cor 9:16-19, 22-23

Over the last 2 Sundays, we have been considering the earliest days of Jesus' ministry in the Gospel of Mark. We first examined the *content* of His message, that is, His Gospel: *repent and believe*. We then considered His *method*: preaching with authority, and driving out evil spirits. Today and next Sunday's Gospels round out this picture of Jesus' method of ministry and revealing His identity as the Son of God. That is, He reveals Himself to be our healer. We'll talk more about Christ the Healer next weekend. Today, I'd like to shift gears a little and consider how all of us can participate in Jesus' work of preaching the Gospel.

In our 2nd reading today, we hear St. Paul proclaim: *woe to me if I do not preach [the Gospel]!* St. Paul had become so captivated by Jesus, that he wanted the whole world to know that its Saviour had come. And so he spent the rest of his life spreading this Good News, and was eventually martyred for this message. St. Paul is truly a model for all of us. Now it's true, St. Paul was not married, and so he had the freedom to travel throughout the Mediterranean, founding churches and proclaiming the Good News. As we heard last Sunday in our 2nd reading, also from St. Paul's 1st Letter to the Corinthians, being unmarried for the purpose of total devotion to the Lord is a particular grace given to some, and one of the many reasons why we have a celibate priesthood in the Latin Church.

But that does not mean that only unmarried clergy can preach the Gospel. Far from it! In fact, each of us has a unique calling—a unique vocation in this life, which makes us uniquely suited to preach certain aspects of that Gospel with particular force because of our vocation. Today we are going to focus on the vocation to marriage and family life. Married couples and families, for instance, are particularly suited to preach what is called the “Gospel of Life,” and the “Gospel of the Family.”

So first, the “Gospel of Life.” Gospel means “*good news*”; and so in speaking of a “Gospel of Life”, we are immediately proclaiming that *life itself is good news!* From the very dawn of creation, the book of Genesis says that God regards His creation as *good*. Even more, human life is the only part of creation that God calls *very good*, because only human beings are created in God's own *image and likeness*, from conception, until natural death. St. Irenaeus wrote in the 2nd century AD that *the living person is the glory of God*, because each of us, more than any other creature, is a reflection of *God's own self* in the world.

Let's take this idea one step further. We know that new human life comes from one father and one mother, which means that married spouses have a unique call, according to the book of Genesis, to make God known in the world by co-creating new human life with God's help (cf. 4:1). Married couples are called to be *fruitful and multiply* (1:28), and so to trust God with their fertility. Simply by lovingly welcoming children into their family (if God so wills it), whether by birth or adoption or fostering, married spouses glorify God and preach the Gospel of Life to a fearful, and increasingly anti-human-life world.

Next, the *Gospel of the Family*. All of us, in one way or another, come from some kind of a family. And so all of us know that being a family is incredibly hard work. It's so hard, in fact, that many people today have given up on family life. So how can we speak of the *Good News* of the family? Well, we speak of the "good news" of the family in the same way as we speak of the "good news" of the Cross of Jesus Christ. In the family we learn self-sacrificing love. We learn perseverance. We learn forbearance. We learn forgiveness. We learn to step out of the slavery of self-love and into the joy of loving others as God loves us.

So how does the Gospel of Life and the Family serve the Gospel of Jesus Christ? Well, when the world sees our love and respect for even the most "unwanted" of human lives, such as the unborn and the elderly, it has to wonder *why? Why love someone who cannot produce anything?* When it sees self-sacrificing families who stay together, come what may, it wonders, *how? How is that possible?* And the answer to that *why* is because God loves all of his children no matter what stage of development we happen to be in; and the *how* is because God's own love has been poured into our hearts through His Holy Spirit! So we see the reason why the Church is unashamedly pro-life and pro-family is because *the very image of God is at stake*. In other words, if we get this wrong, we erase God's image from the world, and mankind is doomed, and we love people too much to allow that to happen!

But here's the catch: embracing the Gospel of Life and the Family in your own life is nearly impossible without first embracing the Gospel of Jesus Christ in your life. And this includes the Cross. The world rejects the difficulties of life because it rejects the Cross. But there is no other way to eternal life than by living no longer for ourselves but for Jesus. And if we live for Jesus, we necessarily must also live for others; first and foremost for your spouse and children. Jesus shows us it is possible to embrace the Cross. As we said, it is His love alive in our hearts through the Holy Spirit that makes such selfless love possible.

There is one more aspect of the Good News of Jesus Christ that we must note here: and that is what I'll call the *good news of God writing straight on crooked lines*. Even those who think they haven't lived up to the Gospel of Life or the Family are not without hope. God can turn even the most difficult of situations into something beautiful, if only we cling to Him in patience and faith, and then follow His will, as difficult as our own cross may be.

So finally, in our 1st reading today, we hear that Job's terrible lot left him almost in despair. The story goes on to tell how many advised Job to just give up; they told him, *curse God, and die*. But Job refuses to give up his faith. He repents of his sin, and he abandons himself to God's will. In doing so, he too preaches a kind of Gospel to those around him, and Job's friends eventually see the truth behind Job's faith. Eventually, Scripture says, *the LORD restored the prosperity of Job*. He lived to see *his children, his grandchildren, and even his great grandchildren*. And then he *died, old and full of years*. The Lord honored Job's faith and made something beautiful out of his cross, and He can do the same in our lives. And this too is Good News worth sharing!