

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, October 29, 2023

The Twenty-Second Sunday After Pentecost

Festal Eucharist

11 a.m.

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Dr. Luigi Gioia, *Theologian in Residence*

on

Matthew 22:34-46

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A Walk in the Park

Obsculta, o fili, praecepta magistri, et inclina aurem cordis tui, et admonitionem pii patris libenter excipe et efficaciter comple, ut ad eum per oboedientiae laborem redeas, a quo per inoboedientiae desidiam recesseras.¹

These are the opening lines of one of the most venerable texts of the Christian tradition and probably of the spiritual patrimony of humanity, the *Rule of Saint Benedict*, written in the 6th century of the Christian era. You will forgive me if I quoted them in the original Latin and if I will not translate them for you.

I promise it is not (just) showing off.

There was a time in my late teens when I learnt by heart many of the seventy-two chapters of the Latin original text of the Rule. One of my favourite daily routines during my first years as a Benedictine monk was to have long solitary strolls through the woods and vineyards that surrounded my monastery in the valley of Chianti near Siena, in Italy, armed with a pocket edition of the Rule which I still treasure, and memorize the passages dedicated to the topics of silence, prayer, obedience, humility, and the “The tools of good works” (a list of 74 do’s and don’ts on how to become a holy monk).

It was not just that I loved the sound and the harmony of these sentences.

There was something more.

It was my youthful naïve way of trying to master this often-frustrating collection of words of wisdom, regulations, warnings which was supposed to be the source of inspiration of my life but which I could not make sense of.

I thought that if I memorized the text, this would somehow shape my desires and feelings – and the original Latin was bound to be even more powerful to this effect – even if (I must confess) I barely understood it at the time.

Just as in many other aspects of our life, when it comes to our Christian faith, our relation with God, our need to feel that we are doing the right thing, we resort to *magical thinking*.

In one way or the other we keep alive the fantasy that there must be a rite, a practice, a principle which once acquired, performed, understood, perfected changes everything.

What makes this ‘magical’ is that it gives us the illusion of control. An illusion we keep chasing to manage the ever-resurging anxiety life keeps throwing at us: I am not good enough, I am not doing enough, I am not making enough, I do not know where I am going – the list is long...

I share with you this memory to explain to you why I do resonate with the Pharisees portrayed in today’s gospel. They too are looking for ways of mastering the law, that is Scripture:

“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?”.

There must be a key, a way of approaching the text, which will unlock it – maybe if I memorize it I am going to have all the answers!

In the end these approaches easily turn into the quest for the *abracadabra*, the magical formula that gives us control over the text – and ultimately control over God’s will!

This is what the Pharisees want from Jesus. Their question basically means: give us the right interpretation! Give us the key!

As always, I *love* Jesus’ way of deflecting these childish, promethean, wishful attempts.

I like to see Jesus’ answer as a waking-up call, as putting a spanner into our works and hopefully cure us from our obsession with control once for all:

Love God with all you heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.

Love your neighbor as yourself.

As often with Jesus’ comebacks this is a provocation.

Take the second sentence, *Love your neighbor as yourself*. As if we knew how to love ourselves so as to know how to love others likewise!

Being complacent with ourselves, blind about our shortcomings – or hard on ourselves, ridden with guilt and self-loathing: this what we find ourselves trapped in most of the time. Is this ‘loving ourselves?’. Is this really helpful in our relation with others? Jesus can’t be really asking us to be complacent, blind, or hard and judgmental with others as we are with ourselves.

Then take the first sentence, *Love God with all you’ve got!* This would mean being able to summon the whole of our desires, our projects, our hopes, our expectations and direct them on one single thing.

There are pathological cases of obsession where this might happen. Sometimes this obsession yields works of unparalleled art but the artist ends up going mad in the process. Think of Michelangelo in his feverish realization of the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel when he fell off one of the scaffoldings and almost killed himself.

Most of the time such obsession is not only impossible but also inadvisable.

This makes me think that maybe we should be careful about taking Jesus’ answer to the Pharisees at its face value.
Why?

Well, for one thing, if you take these sentences literally, you might, like me, end up feeling guilty or embarrassed: I certainly *do not* and *will never*, in this life, love God and others in this way. Personally, the way I deal with this guilt is diversion. I try to reassure myself by reminding myself of what I try to do to love God and others – I tell myself that maybe I should do more - and soon move to the next thing.

So I wonder: is there a more faithful way of dealing with Jesus' goading?

Maybe there is one way – the way I learned from the very Rule of Saint Benedict in my more mature days - once I left behind my attempts to master it by memorizing the text, and started to experience how its provisions play out in real life, that is in the life of the communities I was part of.

I learnt that love can indeed blossom when we give up our obsession with control and learn how to rest and delight in the life of the community we are part of.

This is a conversion, a shift in perception. It happens at the precise instant in which we understand the simple, luminous secret that lies at the heart of Christian faith.

I like to think that this secret is unveiled by reversing the content of Jesus' answer to the Pharisees.

Love your neighbor as yourself becomes *Let yourself to be loved, cherished, cared for by your neighbor* – so as to become able to *really* love yourself, and then hopefully to want to give others what others have given to you.

Love God with all you've got becomes *Take time to appreciate the extent to which God loves you with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his mind* – that will evoke the desire, and the delight in trying to love God as much as you can.

Is there such thing you will wonder? Is there a place, a time, where this really happens?

Well the answer might surprise you – because it points to something we take for granted, and neglect as a result.

Yes, this place does exist: it is our Christian communities.

And yes there is a time too: our Sunday gatherings - and all that flows from them.

I must tell you that there is one thing that has been bothering me concerning the lives of our communities, of our parishes, of our own Saint Thomas, especially over the past year. I fear that too many Christians have lost sight of what huge difference there is between attending church *in person* on Sundays, *every* Sunday, vs simply watching the services online – or coming now and then, when we can, when we have nothing else to do.

There is nothing dramatic about coming to church or missing church on Sunday - I agree.

I also agree that stating that we should come to church to *feel* loved by God and by others would be a stretch too far – and probably (and maybe justifiably) would lead people to stay away. There are love-bombing churches to be sure – but I have seen all too often how this can become yet another form of control and manipulation.

Real love is not what you *feel* on the moment.

Maybe a good image of how real love works is a weekly walk in the park with friends.

It can become a rite: it happens on a regular basis, at the same time, for the same duration, in the same park, following the same path. You might miss it sometimes for good reasons, but you know it is important to stick to it as regularly as possible. The conversation is sometimes anodyne, other times deeper. What makes this rite restorative is not that I *feel* something each time I take part in it, but that *over time* it affects positively many other aspects of my life because it is a time of sharing, listening, delighting in friendship and in nature, it is a break from the stressful rhythms of life.

Allow me to say that maybe the love Jesus is talking about is like **a walk in the park** (pun intended), with your community, every Sunday, in person, here, in church.

You might not register *each time* how much meaning, caring, validation, uplifting, restoring you benefit from – and this is how it should be.

And yet if you stick to it, *over time*, you *will* see how much it changes you, your sense of worth, your inner peace – and how much it enables you to radiate this positivity around you in your daily life.

It might also make you want to do more for others in countless small and sometimes big ways. And it might lead other people to want to join too!

However much I cherished my solitary stroll in the valleys of Chianti in Italy I have come to realize that nothing beats the rite of walks in Central Park with friends – not mastery but letting ourselves to rest in friendship and love.

Ultimately a trust in the extraordinarily changing power of our unremarkable Sunday gatherings – as long as we truly commit to being there, in person.

¹ Rule of Saint Benedict, Prologue 1-2: “Listen carefully, my son, to the master’s instructions, and attend to them with the ear of your heart. This is advice from a father who loves you; welcome it, and faithfully put it into practice. The labor of obedience will bring you back to him from whom you had drifted through the sloth of disobedience”.