

**Psalm 29 Romans 12:6-16 St. Mark 1:1-11**

Living by the Word

In her entertaining and yet very informative book about the Italian city of Montalcino, known for its Brunello, undoubtedly one of the finest (and one of the most expensive) wines in the world, Isabella Dusi tells a story about two Carabinieri, members of the highest level of authority in Italy. It seems there had been some complaints about a farmer firing his small, wheel-mounted canon (used to scare away birds and wild boar from vineyards) at times not in keeping with bureaucratic regulations, thus disturbing more than just the wildlife...and the Carabinieri decided to get to the bottom of it all. She writes:

“This morning, two handsome young officers in immaculately pressed uniforms drove in their blue Alfa Romeo to a small vineyard on the south-western edge of the Brunello zone to investigate. The owner (of the canon) is a small grower. When the officers arrived at the vineyard the grower was absent in Sienna, but his wife, wisely complying with their request, told them where they would find the offending canon. Deciding, the right and just course of action was to confiscate the weapon, the young officers loaded it into the back seat of their Alfa Romeo – not without some difficulty – and were driving out of the property just as the grower arrived home. Each car pulled off the dirt track to the grass beside the vines and the aloof Carabinieri casually wound down a window, informing the grower his canon had been confiscated, and that it was now a matter of State.”

“Furious at losing his canon, the grower knew he had no hope of seeing it again, because every Italian is only too aware from unfortunate experience that once something becomes

a matter of State, you might just as well forget it and cut your losses. Seemingly outraged, he jumped out of his car, arms gesticulating wildly, pleading, but the righteous Carabineiri refused to listen and, waving him away accelerated out of the vineyard. (The grower) looked at his watch...it was two minutes to mezzogiorno (midday), but he was not thinking of his lunch...”

“As the twelve chimes of the midday bell rang out across the valley, the Alfa Romeo was still in sight, rounding the curves which he knew would take the Carabineiri and his costly canon to the police station...the hundred gongs of mezzogiorno began and his fear became reality. The reverberation of the firing canon exploding inside the Alfa Romeo echoed around the hills and the quaking car careered dangerously about the road. Two quivering officers clutched their heads, deafened by the thunderous noise. The back seat was in tatters, the rear window blown to pieces, glass everywhere, and two crimson faces switched between fury and mortification...”

“‘I tried to tell them,’ (the grower) argued at Carabineiri headquarters later, ‘but they refused to listen!’” (Isabella Dusi, *Vanilla Beans and Brodo: Real Life in the Hills of Tuscany*, Pocket Books, London, 362-364)

Now the reason I have taken the time to tell you this fairly long story is because I sometimes feel like the Brunello Grower...ever so often I have to deal with people whose lives have been blown apart by life’s various canons that would not have happened if only the person or persons involved had listened! I heard of a Baptist preacher who was pulled aside by his Deacon Board and questioned as to why he had preached the same sermon three successive Sundays...he replied with a question for them. “Have you done what I told you to do in the sermon? Well then, why should I preach another sermon if

you have not applied what I told you in this one?” Can you imagine what a difference it would have made if the Jewish authorities had believed and applied St. John the Baptist’s message with regard to the One coming after Him upon Whom the Spirit of God rested? And I am sure the Lord sometime scratches His head and says, “But my dear little children, I have done absolutely everything possible for you to live life as I designed it to be lived...I not only told you Who I am and who you are and what you need to do if we are to get together and remain together, but I did it for you...I died in your place...I paid the penalty for your transgressions...what’s more, I sent you My own Spirit to live in you to help you do what I know you can’t do on your own...but you refuse to listen! You listen to everyone else...you take their advice...but you don’t consult My Word...and when you do, you twist it into whatever shape you want it to be so that it appears to support your decisions...I made you...I know what’s best for you. So, why do you roll up your window and drive away from me? I know you’ve got a canon sitting in the back seat of your life just waiting to go off...”

I mean take our Epistle passage for today as an example. Last week we saw in the opening verses of Romans 12 that St. Paul was encouraging his readers to give feet and hands to what he had just taught them in the first eleven chapters. As I said in that sermon, biblical doctrines must be translated into practice...as St. James said in his Epistle, we are meant to be doers of the Word, not hearers only. For this reason, St. Paul followed up on his exhortation for us to be living sacrifices and for us to be transformed by the renewing of our minds with a list of different ways in which we might apply what we have learned. This list may be broken up into four broad categories, namely Fervent Zeal, Fervent Service, Fervent Love and Fervent Hope.

Firstly, everything we do for a God Who has done and continues to do so much for us should be done with great devotion, diligence and enthusiasm. Last week, I was so blessed to see little Austin Sweet running to get into church...yes, I know it was because it was cold out, but his actions show that it is not a drag for him to come to worship the Lord. And it should never be a drag to do anything for God! You know, if you are truly in love with someone, it shows, doesn't it? You simply can't hide it. It is a natural external expression of what is happening internally. So, what does this say about our relationship with our Lord? Dearest brethren, do you use the gifts the Lord has given you with fervent zeal for Him and His Kingdom? Is it obvious to those around you that you love Him?

Which leads us to the second category, fervent service. Everyone of us has been given life by God's Holy Spirit. If you don't have God's Spirit you don't have God's gift of life...period. That's just the way it works. However, the Spirit does not just give us life...He also gives each and every single one of us various gifts to use for the benefit of all. And that's the important part – for the benefit of all...others...not for ourselves. The Holy Spirit has given these gifts to us for us to use...now, one would think that is obvious, but remember our Lord warned us not to hide our lights under a pail, but to shine out our lights before men in such a ways that they might see our good works and glorify our God. So He knew that we have a tendency to shy away from using the gifts He gives us for various reasons – the most obvious is our own inability to consistently do good. But we must also remember that the gracious Giver of these gifts is also the gracious Enabler...our God doesn't just tell us what to do, He helps to do what He tells us to do....He doesn't just give us the gifts, but He works in and through us as we use

them. But this means that if we don't use them, we will never know the joy of being enabled by God to do His work with Him...our lives will not be enriched or built up through the challenge of doing things God's way instead of our way...and therefore it should not come as a surprise that we end up doing things that blow up in the back seat of our lives.

And then there's fervent love. You know for a people who serve a God Who loves them unconditionally we do a poor job at following His example, don't you think? If God had to deal with us as we deal with our loved ones, our friends, our acquaintances, our neighbors, our co-workers...where would we be? We have sinned and we do sin...does God forgive us? We mess up time and time again, but does God give up on us? Dearest brethren, if you profess to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, you ought to love just as He loves, don't you think? One of God's purposes for those who believe in Jesus is that we become like Jesus...and that this likeness shows in the way we live our lives and how we treat other fellow sinners...other fellow messes. Surely of all people, our love ought to be more than pretence...more than lip service. If we are to love as Jesus loves we ought to give ourselves to serve for the good of others. Biblical love must find expression in what we do for others, not for ourselves...even if our love is never reciprocated. Now think about that for a moment. Love that is only out to get is not biblical love...it is selfish and self-centered and self-absorbed...it is worldly...as St. Paul tells us here, "Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil. Cling to what is good." If we don't love as Jesus loves and yet we claim to be His followers, are we not hypocrites? Do we not then embrace evil (the ways of the world) and abandon good (the ways of our Lord)?

Now, of course, none of this will be easy...it goes against the grain of our sinful selves. I mean, for how many of us does loving your enemies come naturally? Or blessing those who persecute or hurt us? When someone cuts in front of you while driving is your first response, "Oh dear Lord, bless that man or woman...give them a wonderful time talking on their blessed cell phone"? Living in line with what God tell us in His Word will be an uphill battle until we breathe out our very last breath, but this should never discourage us as all of this is part of becoming more and more like Jesus. That's our goal...and, as you all know, good things do not come easily or cheaply...we have to train for the spiritual race and we have persist in running it to the end and overcoming the temptation to give up – to leave the straight and narrow track and to join the world on the benches. But, as Jesus said, we ought to be of good cheer because He has overcome the world...and He has not left us orphans, but has sent us His own Spirit to live in us and to help us along the way.

But the fact remains dearest brethren, that if you don't want a nasty surprise booming off in the rear seat of your life, you need to get stuck into reading, learning, and doing what God tells you to do in His Word...if you won't listen...if you wont hear and do...you too will be crimson faced as you survey the tatters of what could have been a wonder filled life.

So, as you come to partake of God's greatest gift to you, ask Him to give you the humility to admit that you have not always followed through on what He has taught you and to give you the grace to get out of your proverbial vehicle, open the rear door and allow Him to discharge whatever canon you have sitting back there. Ask Him to help

you see your life through His eyes...ask Him to help you see what He sees...and then ask Him to help you do what He knows you need to do.

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