

Psalm 42 Romans 12:16-21 St. John 2:1-11

Radical Obedience

In the delightful first Disney Hindi Movie, “Like Stars on Earth”, one of the main characters tells a story about how people in the Solomon Islands clear their land of trees. According to him, instead of cutting down the trees with chain saws and axes, they gather together around the trees and hurl curses at them. After a while the trees die and they can plant their crops. Now, I checked it out on the internet and this is actually true...whether it works or not, the practice still exists among some of these Islanders to this day...in spite of the fact that Christianity pervades most of the country.

Now, the character in the movie tells the story to challenge the father of the main character...a young boy of 8 who, unknown to his parents and teachers, has dyslexia...Ishaan is his name. The older son, the brother of Ishaan whose name is Yohann by the way (spelled with a ‘y’), was an over-achiever, scoring A’s on every test. Ishaan, on the other hand, had failed 3rd grade and was well on his way to repeat that failure. But the application of this story about the ritual of tree cursing in the Solomon Islands was that the constant abuse hurled at this child was slowly, but surely killing him. But this is not only true of parent-child or teacher-child relationships...this is true of any human relationship...contrary to the English Rhyme, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me”, words do the most amazing damage over time...damage which is often only seen in symptoms...depression, anger, withdrawal from society, irrational behavior, loss of interest in that which used to inspire and so on...somewhere at the bottom of those types of symptoms lies a cause and that cause is

usually a slow yet effective form of methodical character assassination...a piece by piece dismantlement of personhood.

But this should not be the case as far as Christians are concerned. The Gospel presents a radically different way of behaving towards others. For instance, in the Beatitudes, our Lord Jesus commands us to love our enemies, to bless those who curse us, to do good to those who spitefully use us, to pray for those who persecute us, to love those who do not love us...we are to forgive as we have been forgiven and to deal with our faults before trying to point out the faults of others. And St. Paul picks up on this theme in our Epistle lesson for today as well.

Last week we read that our love ought to be without hypocrisy...that we are to abhor evil and cling to what is good...that we are to be kindly affectionate to one another...that we are to give preference to one another...that we are to bless and not curse those who persecute us...that we are to be humble and not haughty. Today we began with a statement that no doubt underlies all these instructions: “Do not be wise in your own opinion.” This is a loose quotation from Proverbs 3:7, “Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord and depart from evil.” In practice, the fear of the Lord will lead us to consider His mind prior to any action on our part...think on this for a moment will you? If we were to first search out God’s will on any given matter before we commit ourselves in any way, the consequences of our words and deeds would not have such a devastating or demoralizing effect on those around us, would they? God’s thoughts toward us are for good only, never for evil. Our Lord is other-person-centered, not self-centered. He always wants what is best for us. So, if we were to act upon His “opinions” rather than our own, the outcome will always be positive, not so? At least from our side...

Think on the story of the wedding feast in Cana. The Blessed Virgin Mary told the servants to do whatever Jesus told them to do. Now, imagine if the servants each followed their own opinion instead. What would have happened? Well, obviously here we enter into the realm of speculation, but I do think it safe to say that the outcome would not have been so joyous as it was when they simply obeyed Him. If only we could learn never to act on our own opinion, but rather to act on a biblically informed opinion, things would be much better for the world...

So, the first person we need to take care of to ensure that we behave as is fitting for those who profess to follow Jesus is...who? My co-worker? My spouse? My sibling? My boss? My fellow parishioners? Who is the first person I need to deal with to ensure a biblical attitude on my part? Yes, that's right! Myself! All too often we think that if only so and so would change, I would have a better attitude...I would have a better life...I would be happier. Beloved brethren, no created being ever has the power to make you do anything, save yourself! So, the first (and actually also the last) person to work on is me. Now, the rest of the injunctions listed through to the end of the chapter seem to build on this premise. If I always endeavor to take care to submit myself to God's Word, then I will never repay any one evil for evil. Imagine a world in which no one ever tried to get even! But this attitude goes against the grain of fallen humanity doesn't it? So we, as people who claim to follow in the footsteps of our Lord Jesus, have to rely on the indwelling Holy Spirit to help us develop a radical obedience to the will of the One Who always knows what is best for us.

This particular verse is also very interesting in that it is possible to loosely translate it all as one sentence...something like, "Don't stoop to the level of someone evil in an attempt

to get even, but rather plan ahead to do for that person what everyone knows is best for them!” Isn’t that great? Plan ahead to do what is good...plan ahead...that takes some thought and preparation...but thought and preparation that should come naturally to those who read the Bible. Remember Proverbs 25:21 says, “If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink.” Then there is that Golden Rule that governs the way we ought to treat others regardless of whether they are friend or foe...remember the Golden Rule? Do unto others before they do it to you, right? No, do unto others what you would have them do unto you...which is really just a variation of “love your neighbor as yourself”. Treat others like you want them to treat you...

However, this selfless attitude is so different to what we want to do when someone crosses us. We want to give them back what they did to us with knobs on! Isn’t that what lawsuits are all about? Getting even? Or actually getting more...getting as much as you can...”I want him to hurt as much as he hurt me...or even more.” But that is not the way of the real Christian...in fact St. Paul goes on to say that as far as it depends on us, we should live peaceably with everyone! Wow! Imagine that! What this means is basically that if there ever is a problem between you and someone else, you should never be the source of the problem! This doesn’t mean that there will never be disharmony between you and everyone else in the world...but it does mean that you will never be the cause or the maintainer of that discord! You should always seek to be reconciled with those who are at odds with you because that’s the way your Lord operates...the One you claim to follow...

And then St. Paul nails our self-righteous protestations shut with verse 19. “Beloved, do not avenge yourselves; but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, “Vengeance is

Mine, I will repay,” says the Lord.” Now, it is not wrong to think that evil-doers ought to be punished. God is angry with sinners and has every right to be...after all, look at what havoc they wreak in His world! But it is wrong for us...we who are sinners ourselves...we who are finite and do not have all the information...we who don't have the bigger picture and who are not able to see into hearts and minds...we who have no clue of what the future holds...it is wrong for us to presume to judge as if we know all things and are able to consider all the angles. That is why it is wrong for us to judge...it is not that our Lord doesn't care...not at all! He cares a great deal about what people do. But He knows how best to deal with us as He alone knows everything about us...so for us to constantly be fiddling with the splinters in the eyes of our fellow fallen creatures, while we are blinded by our own beams is ridiculous...not to mention incredibly arrogant and foolish!

And besides, remember the saying, “you become what you eat?” Well, that is just as true for what you think and do...if you think and do evil, you will become evil...and so, the Apostle wraps it all up with a final injunction: “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” Dearest brethren, if you stoop to use the weapons of the world, don't be surprised when you find yourself on the losing side of life. No, the way forward as a Christian is to swallow the bitter pill, whatever it may be, and to keep doing good regardless...to keep plugging away at doing whatever He says to us...to keep learning to be radically obedient in spite of how much it irks us. That is the only way to live a victorious life...and, indeed, a happy one.

After all, consider what the Eucharist teaches us about our Lord...that He was radically obedient to the will of His Father even to the point of death on the cross...He drank the

bitter cup of our sin to the dregs...all for our sakes...and that while we were yet His enemies! So, as you come to partake of His Body broken for you and His Blood shed for you, ask Him Who learned obedience through suffering because of the evil deeds of self-righteous people, to help you learn to do the same...to be radically obedient to the will of the Father. Ask Him to challenge you daily to make decisions in keeping with His will as you face the onslaught of worldliness.

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