

The Inclusive Community

Thirty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time

November 15, 2009

Homily of Anthony T. Padovano

Mark 13:1-8

Envy and Death

There are two great fears in life which diminish us: the fear that we do not have enough and the fear that we shall lose it all. Envy is a word that describes the fear of not having enough. Death is a word that expresses our fear of losing it all. Let us take each of these in turn.

Envy

Dante lists envy as the second deadliest of the seven deadly sins. Pride is the worst but envy grows out of it. Pride convinces me I deserve everything; envy is the anger I feel that I did not get everything.

Envy makes me feel that I not only want what everyone else has but I desire it because it is there even though I have no need of it and really may not want it. Children sometimes desire the toy or the treat a sibling has only because the sibling likes it. Sometimes a child will discard something and not want it unless a sibling or friend is so delighted with it that the child wants it back.

Envy makes us suppose that we want not only everything everyone else has but also all the happiness that goes with it. It is a cancer of the soul always metastasizing as it grows on the health and happiness of others. It constantly deludes us, making us suppose that if we had one more advantage, one more possession, one more talent, one more friend or connection, we would be happy and say we had enough. But there is never enough in this whirlwind of frenzy and this lust for more.

In today's Gospel, Jesus and the disciples are on what Mark tells us is their first and only trip to Jerusalem. John gives Jesus three years of ministry and preaching; Mark says there was only one. We go with Mark today.

Imagine the scene. Jesus and the disciples, a carpenter's son and a group of fishermen, have left Galilee for Jerusalem, Mississippi for Manhattan, as it were. They came from a

rural and agrarian environment. There were some cities of good size in Galilee. Sephoris is the capital and there was Tiberius, a large city built on the Sea. But this brave band of a rabbi and his friends spend most of their time in small villages like Nazareth or Capernaum.

Now they are in Jerusalem, the jewel of Israelite culture and identity. They go to the Temple, built over the site where Abraham once readied Isaac for sacrifice, on the very site where David made Jerusalem his capital. Abraham, Isaac, David were here.

Solomon built the first temple here and it housed the tablets on which the Ten Commandments were written.

That Temple had been destroyed and rebuilt over the years. When Herod the Great became King of Israel in 37 B.C., he decided that he would rebuild the city with one massive project after the other. In 19 B.C., eighteen years into his reign, he took up the great architectural triumph of his life. He would rebuild the Temple on so grand a scale that nothing before it or after it would equal it. He would be the new David and Solomon of Jewish history. As so often in massive architecture, the motive force driving it was political with a tinge of envy. He wanted to be the greatest of all Jewish kings partly because people felt he was not all that Jewish. He came from Idumea, an area many considered questionably Jewish and he was religiously more heathen? than Jewish and he was clearly a puppet of the Roman emperor.

He spared no expense, sacrificing, not Isaac on this site but the people's money and resources. Herod had killed some of his sons not because they were sacrifices to God but because he thought they were plotting against him. Envy and paranoia are allies. Caesar Augustus, the emperor, the great Roman emperor, said about Herod in one of history's great lines: "I would rather be Herod's pig than Herod's son." The sons had a shorter life expectancy with Herod than the pigs.

In any case, Herod put 10,000 men to work and trained 1000 priests as masons to build the most sacred parts of the Temple. It was the great stimulus package of that day. The building was begun in 19 B.C. and the outside structure and massive walls were finished in 9 B.C., five years before Herod's death. The Pharisees in John 2:20 tell Jesus that the Temple had been under construction for 46 years. That would make it the year 27 A.D. It was completely finished in 64 A.D., 83 years after it was started. Six years later, in 70 A.D. the Romans destroyed it to crush a Jewish rebellion against Roman authority. It is right around this time that Mark writes the first Gospel ever written. The Western Wall of Herod's Temple is one of the most sacred sites in Israel today. Its massive stones are breath-taking, even today. Jews come here to pray every year by the thousands.

Mark has this small group from Galilee, from Mississippi, looking at the skyscraper in Manhattan.

"Look, Teacher, Rabbi, what large stones and large buildings."

The disciples are awed and filled with institutional envy. Just think if we had this structure, this power, this platform.

Jesus is not impressed. He looks at the structure, still being built as it will be for another 37 years after this. This Temple would take longer than replacing the Twin Towers in Manhattan!

Jesus says: “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down. “

Stop being envious, Jesus tells them that Religion, true spirituality, does not need a Temple or a huge institution. It just needs a human heart. A temple is not worth one human heart. Jesus tells the disciples they have all they need; they have enough. When things get this massive, corruption finds a comfortable home there. Jesus, in effect, lets us know that God gave us a human heart. Temples are less awe-inspiring.

Death

And now Jesus takes up the theme of losing everything, the theme of death itself. He goes to the Mount of Olives, opposite the Temple. The prophet Zechariah (14:4) spoke of the end of time, with God standing on the Mount of Olives. The Mount of Olives was connected with apocalyptic ideas.

Death is in the air as Jesus speaks. It is only days before the crucifixion. The disciples ask Jesus about how they would cope if the Temple went and soon after that, the end of the world. Jesus observes that both will happen. Institutions die; Temples crumble; the cosmos will collapse; each of you will die; “I will die.” Do not fear this. It is part of life. Even if the sun and moon grow dark and stars fall from heaven, I will light your way. God will bring you home. Not because you have a Temple or a religion, but because you have a human heart.

The Romans we know, destroyed the Temple. And they destroyed the Body of Jesus. And then Rome fell in 476 A.D. And Jesus lives. And God lives. No Temple or institution ever took their measure. Everything dies except God. Temples are often built by pride and invite envy. They make you distrust your heart. We all fear death and do not choose it. If a Temple can go, if Jerusalem can fall, who are we to think we are worth salvaging? Are we really worth more than those?

Jesus says that this is the central point we keep missing. God did not build a Temple in the creation story of Genesis. God built an environment that would nurture life. God gave us light and air and plants and seas so that the human heart could be made from all of these. It was the only thing God wanted made from the creation story; life and the love that comes from life. We build Temples excessively and we envy power and we fear death because we lose contact with our hearts. Envy and fear are the signs we lost our hearts, not to love but to narcissism. We wanted a Temple, a kingdom, an empire, immortality. God gave us a human heart and told us we need nothing else.