

Lent IV (19 March 2023)

“...he saith unto Philip, Whence shall we buy bread, that these may eat?

And this he said to prove him: for he himself knew what he would do. Philip answered him, Two hundred pennyworth of bread is not sufficient for them, that every one of them may take a little. One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, saith unto him, There is a lad here, which hath five barley loaves, and two small fishes: but what are they among so many?”

+In the Name...

Where are you vacationing this year? As the weather turns warmer, (my phone claimed it hit 67 in Portland yesterday, but we shall not tell my wife about that, as the high in Hartland was a roasty-toasty 23!) our minds begin to think of traveling we might do. Of course, traveling may not be limited to the summers if you are not a teacher or do not have school-age children at home, but isn't there something about a warm, sunny day that makes us want to get out of the house and go somewhere?

Our Gospel reading tells of a crowd that followed Jesus. We do not know how far they followed Jesus, but we have a young boy that brought his lunch

with him. Did he always carry a lunch? Well, perhaps not so he must have expected either a long-ish trip or at least to be gone awhile even if he was not traveling far. Of course, far is relative. Very few of us live close enough to this Parish to walk here, but this boy probably had no other options. Have fish, will travel.

Is that the reason that America's churches are not full today? That hardly seems likely. In our neighborhood where one can scarcely be more than a stone's throw from a church building, if everyone who lived closer to St. Mark's than any other church attended here, I suspect we would need ten services every Sunday! No, the journey that is the problem here is the one between our heads and our hearts. St. Thomas Aquinas wrote centuries ago that each human being has the Natural Law written in his heart: we know deep down inside that there is a God and it is our duty to love and worship Him. The harder part is getting our intellect to agree with that. It may not be good for business or my finances, it may not be good for my reputation, it may not be good for my sleeping schedule; the list could go on and on. In the case of each excuse, we could make a very sensible argument (at least from the standpoint

of our post-modern society) of why we should follow what our brain can argue logically rather than what God has put in our hearts. There is the argument that what we have on offer is something that the average person may not think he needs. For instance, everyone knows the necessity of tooth care. Therefore, if I am a toothbrush salesman, all I have to do is convince you that my toothbrush is better than some other brand of toothbrush. The Church has a tougher job: we have to convince the non-believer that his teeth are worth caring for in the first place, and then that we have the best defense against the evils of tooth decay and gingivitis! That is where the Natural Law comes in: the Church must help the non-believer make that journey from the head to the heart.

This week we had two saints on our calendar who help illustrate this point. One is famous, although probably not for the reason I am bringing him up, and the other one you may not have heard of before this sermon. The first is our old friend St. Patrick. Despite what you may have seen in this neighborhood if you were around on Friday night, there is no record of the historical St. Patrick wearing an oversized green foam hat or drinking green beer! I am not even going to speak of his driving the snakes out of Ireland or

explaining the mystery of the Holy Trinity by use of a shamrock. Did you know that Patrick was not Irish by birth? The historical Patrick was British (as in, born on the island of Great Britain), but was kidnapped from his boyhood home and transported to Ireland. There he worked as a slave on a farm until he was able to escape and return to his native land. After returning to Britain, Patrick discerned a call to the priesthood and upon ordination returned to the land of his captors, believing they were in need of the Gospel. None of us would argue that the Irish did not need to hear the good news, or any non-believers. But to willingly agree to return to a land that was not your own where you had been dragged against your will is unimaginable to us. In my life I once took a position in another state. It did not work out and I could not leave the state fast enough! At the time of my departure, I never wanted to return to the state again. I certainly never considered returning to preach the good news to those who had treated me so shamefully. Patrick had to travel back and forth across the Irish Sea several times, but the harder journey must have been the journey from his head to his heart.

The other journey we should look at is that of St. Cyril of Jerusalem. Cyril was a bishop in the fourth century but was banished twice from his see city by the emperor. In neither instance had he done anything wrong. Once he was on the right side of an argument, at least as far as history was concerned. Both times the instigator was not the emperor himself but the bishop of Caesarea. This bishop was an Arian heretic, and when Cyril refused to agree with him, the bishop reported him to the emperor. (Arians believed that Christ was a created being by God the Father, and therefore somehow a lesser deity.) When a new emperor was enthroned, Cyril was returned to his see. Sadly, it was not to be permanent because the Bishop of Caesarea would again report his old foe to the next new emperor. This time it was just pure politics: Caesarea had been an important see city, but as time progressed it became outclassed by its neighbor Jerusalem. After all, it was the birthplace of Christianity and so it was the site of pilgrimages, and more respect was paid to its bishop. This change was unacceptable to the bishop of Caesarea. Once again, Cyril was shipped off into exile. As with Patrick, there was a lot of traveling back and forth but not always according to the will of the saint. Cyril

could have easily said, “Enough!” but he chose a longer journey still: the one from his head to his heart, to do what God had called him to do.

So go ahead and think about your next vacation. Plan away so that it will be enjoyable and a wonderful use of your time. May it result in rest and relaxation! But on the next not-so-pretty day this Lent (and it is still Portland after all, so you know it will be soon) think about that most important journey of your life, the one from your head to your heart. There won't be any frequent flyer miles, nor good photos to bore your friends with when you return. But it will ultimately beat the most glamorous trip you can imagine, and you won't even have to exchange your money or find your passport.

+In the Name...