

Sixth Sunday

February 16, 2020

Did you notice that striking sentence from our first reading today taken from the Book of Sirach. It said: “God has set before you fire and water; to whichever you choose, stretch forth your hand.”

What does that mean? As far as I can see, it means that God has created us in such a way that we have choices. The example given here is the choice between fire and water. Fire and water are opposites. The choice of one excludes the choice of the other. If things are the same, it is harder to choose between them, for they are practically the same. So choice implies diversion and difference, a going in different ways.

An Anglican scripture scholar, Reginald Fuller, once wrote that that this passage from Sirach seems to imply that we humans are absolutely free, that we stand before our choices with perfect balance, like a perfectly balanced scale. But Fuller does not think that such a view takes into account our hankering after what is evil, that apparently constant temptation we have to choose what is evil. So he suggests that we balance this passage from Sirach by rereading ch. 7 of Paul’s Letter to the Romans where Paul agonizes over his inability to choose what is good and his constant leaning

towards what is evil. Paul writes there: “So, then, I discover the principle that when I want to do right, evil is at hand. For I take delight in the law of God, in my inner self, but I see in my members another principle at war with the law of my mind, taking me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Miserable one that I am!” (Rom 7:20-22).

Fuller claims that the Sirach text, if it is not balanced by Paul’s view, is the view of an early English theologian named Pelagius which was condemned by the church. Another writer of bygone days, Hillaire Belloc, once wrote a ditty making fun of Pelagius’ view. It went something like this: Pelagius lived in Cardonoel and taught his doctrine there, how whether you went to heaven or hell was your own affair, how whether you rose to eternal joys or sank forever to burn, it had nothing to do with the Church but was your own concern.” In short, Pelagius believed we are completely free to choose either fire or water. The Pauline view, on the other hand, teaches that while we are free, our freedom is impaired and needs divine grace to choose the good.

When we move on to today’s Gospel, it is clear that the Lord believes that we can choose between fire and water, between good and evil. Presuming that, he now moves on to change our

concentration from external actions to internal or interior motivations. Our choices begin in our hearts before they express themselves in external actions. And here is where morality first lives. He has two very clear examples of this move from the external action to the interior act. We must not only abstain from killing others, he says, but we must also not give in to anger in our hearts. If we feel anger in our hearts, we must seek to remove it by reconciling ourselves to those with whom we are angry. So the progress here is from outward action to interior thoughts and interior choices, choices in the heart which then lead to action. His second example has the same message. Not only must we abstain from adulterous actions, we must also abstain from adulterous thoughts. His third example is a bit different. People reinforce their promises to others by swearing an oath. Don't do that, Jesus says. Your word should be enough. The oath is sworn only when the truthfulness of your word is in doubt and needs to be reaffirmed. How beautifully simple is the Lord's view. Your word should be enough. Let your yes be yes and your no be no. Then he adds: "Anything more is from the evil one." If we took the Lord's command literally, we would not take oaths. Would that work in our society today? I suspect not. Look at the impeachment trial. The senators had to swear under oath to judge the case before them impartially. Indeed, the one Republican senator who voted for the

president's impeachment did so because of his oath to God to tell the truth. Imagine if he had said that he did not need to swear an oath, that his yes meant yes and his no no. He would not have been allowed to take part in the process.

I suspect that we have long since learned the Lord's lesson that morality is a matter of the heart and motivations before it is a matter of external actions. Moreover, we might also agree with Fuller that the impression which the Sirach text encourages, that we stand in perfect freedom before our choices, has to be balanced by Paul's insistence that our freedom is weak and in need of grace. But where does that leave us? Is there a lesson for us in today's Gospel? Do we need to be told again that morality begins in our minds and hearts before we get to the actions of our lives? Years ago we Catholic were sometimes ridiculed by others as being pharisaical, that is, as being people who kept all sorts of external church laws like going to Mass every Sunday and eating fish on Fridays but did not always bring our ordinary lives and thinking into agreement with these external actions. One example would be a scene from one of the Godfather movies when the new godfather is having his baby baptized while at the very same moment his henchmen are killing an enemy. In other words, a huge contradiction between action and inner life. Today, of course,

Catholic fidelity to externals has lessened. But what about the unity between our ordinary lives and our internal thoughts and motivations? Are we whole? Or are we schizophrenic, doing one thing and thinking another. Of course this is a life-long task. When all our thoughts are good and all our actions conform to them, our work is almost done. But this work, it seems, is never completely done. We must keep plugging away at it each day. But as we do so, the grace of God impelling us to the good should gain more and more strength in our minds and hearts. May that be so for us!

Amen.