33rd Sunday of Ordinary Time “A warning against apathy”

Fr. Frank Schuster

Well, I don’t know about you, but this past week was a little boring wasn’t it? A little dull, maybe? Far from it actually, as we all know! As a pastor you can imagine I get to witness a number of different reactions in the community. Some in our community are rejoicing this week at our country’s pick for president and some are outright despairing. For my part, I am just glad it is over. For one, it is nice to finally hear leaders in both political parties start saying nice things about each other in the hopes for a good transition. We will see how long that lasts. However, as Catholics, regardless how we are feeling about the election, we have an obligation to pray. Prayer is a powerful activity. Let’s pray for our current president, pray for our next president, and continue to pray for our country and for each other. Our Country’s motto is e pluribus unum, out of the many one. That is a good prayer moving forward I think.

And as much as I hoped for a therapeutically calming set of scripture readings for this Sunday after the election, alas we have been given rather apocalyptic readings. The readings always get apocalyptic this time of year as we approach the solemnity of Christ the King and the beginning of Advent. Jesus says in front of the Temple in Jerusalem, “All that you see here- the days are coming when there will not be left a stone upon another stone that will not be thrown down.” These are frightening words. And for all you history buffs, Jesus’ prophesy here in fact actually came to pass. In 70 AD, the temple was in fact destroyed. All that was left was the western retaining wall, which is now called the Wailing Wall, the most holy site in Judaism.

Malachi in the first reading joins in the apocalyptic chorus saying, “Lo, the day is coming, blazing like an oven, when all the proud and all evildoers will be stubble.” Yikes! That’s scary. Even St. Paul is encouraging his disciples against apathy in the second reading. Why are the readings this November becoming more and more frightening? My friends, my take is the readings this Sunday are warning us against apathy in the spirit life, going through life forgetting what is important. They warn us to guard against laziness in the spirit life by reminding us that we are mortal and that we do not have all the time in the world. We shouldn’t put off to tomorrow what we should be doing today. And this is a very difficult and challenging reminder.

After all, who here wants to think about their mortality? Raise your hand! I don’t want to think about death, I don’t want to think about heaven and hell. During November, however, the Gospel says, “tough, we better think about it”. We will die someday. There will be an accounting of my life! There are the real possibilities of heaven or hell in my future. And time isn’t as plentiful as I would like to delude myself into thinking! God has given us the gift of time for us to move about. God has given us the gift of talents so that we may build up his kingdom. God has given us the gift of life. But this gift is temporary and we will give it back to God someday. The Gospels challenge us to contemplate those areas in our lives we know we should correct but have been putting off because we have been lulled in complacency by a false belief that I have all the time in the world…when I don’t.
Well, once I complete that next project at work, then I will start going to Church regularly. There is no rush. After I max out my credit card for this that or the other thing, I will become more generous with my money after I pay these bills. There is no rush. After I achieve my career goals then I will make my family my first priority, there is no rush. I can wait until next year before I give up the grudge I have with this person or that family member. There’s no rush. I’ll wait until next year before I give God my first fruits of my time, talent and treasure. There’s time to get my priorities in order, there’s no rush. My friends, the bible has a way of reminding us that the road to hell was paved by people who thought there was no rush. The scriptures this weekend encourage us to adopt a measure of urgency.

C.S. Lewis underscores that point in his book, the Screwtape Letters. Any of you read that little book? It’s great. Screwtape is a demon writing to his nephew Wormwood giving advice on how to ruin souls. He finishes the twelfth letter to his Nephew with the words, “Indeed, the safest road to hell is the gradual one – the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts, your affectionate uncle Screwtape.”

Jesus is very clear in his warning to us today: we ought not put off to tomorrow what we should be doing today. And as a professional procrastinator myself, I find this a helpful message. A pastoral invitation would be for us to look at our relationships in our families and find a broken relationship to heal. I think this is especially important in the wake of such a divisive election with Thanksgiving around the corner. Let’s heal the relationships in our family starting today so we can enjoy thanksgiving and not choke on our turkey. Meanwhile, let’s look at our health and lifestyle and, if necessary, make the changes we need to make. Look at our financial situation and get our priorities in order. And above all, look at our relationship with God and, if necessary, make the right choices so that our soul becomes healthier. Perhaps our souls can work on being a little more kind as well and compassionate. Ultimately, we are invited to better stewardship of the gifts God has given us. For at the end of time, there will be an accounting.

This is a difficult challenge. Some might call the message uncomfortable. It is an uncomfortable message in uncomfortable times. But if the readings say anything today, they say one thing loud and clear. Being a follower of Jesus isn’t for wimps! Being a Christian takes work. The good news is Christianity shows us the path to heaven. There is a catch though. The road to heaven is the one that includes a cross.