

22nd Sunday of Ordinary Time “The Wheel of Fortune”

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The best image I have ever found for the Gospel this weekend is in Bishop Robert Barron book *Heaven in Stone in Glass*. He writes about how in some Cathedrals in Europe, if you look closely, sometimes you can find the wheel of fortune depicted in the artwork. Of course, we are not talking about a casino game or television program. The medieval wheel of fortune has something very important to say to us that is spiritually beneficial. There are four interesting figures depicted around this wheel. The fellow on top says in Latin, “Reigno” “I am king, I reign”. There is an unfortunate chap on the side, falling down, who says, “Regnavi, I used to be king, I used to reign” Then at the bottom, there is this pitiable pauper who says, “sum sine regno, I have no power. I don’t reign.” Then, as we continue our journey up the wheel of fortune, there is this arrogant fellow who says, “Regnabo. I am going to reign. I will be king.” And the wheel of fortune goes round and round and round. If you are the pauper, well, that’s ok, there is only one direction from the bottom and that’s up. If you are power hungry, seeking fame, you may get it, but it won’t last. If you are master of the universe, well, good for you, you won’t be forever. Round and round the wheel will go, where it will stop for you, nobody knows. An interesting thing about the wheel of fortune as an artwork is: anyone who walks through the Church doors walks into a place where princes and paupers are both welcome. They can look up and place themselves somewhere on the wheel.

At the center of the wheel of fortune, however, who do you think we find? None other than Christ the King, himself! The invitation of this medieval artwork is, if you find yourself someplace on the wheel of fortune in life, going round and round, the invitation is to stop living on the edge of the wheel. Rather, go to the center and find Jesus, who alone transcends the wheel of fortune and the fickleness of life. Jesus Christ, we recall, was just as divine when he was born in poverty as he was in heaven. Jesus was just as much royalty on Good Friday and he was on Palm Sunday. No matter where Christ found himself in life, he transcended the wheel of fortune. And we see Jesus talking about the wheel of fortune in the Gospel today, don’t we? Jesus says, “Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.” For those whose lives revolve around the wheel of fortune, this makes sense.

How do we transcend from the periphery and fickleness of life to center where Christ reigns? The journey begins with humility. Like Sirach tells us in our first reading, “My child, conduct your affairs with humility, and you will be loved more than giver of gifts.” Of course, what do we mean by humility? Humility, it seems to me, isn’t false self-abasement. Humility isn’t making show of how lowly I am. Humility, it seems to me, is rather a kin to honesty. Being humble means standing on the humus, a word that means “ground”. A humble person is grounded, he or she has an honesty about who they are, that no matter where life takes them, riches or poverty, they transcend the wheel of fortune by being centered, grounded in Christ.

A great example of this is Mother Teresa whose feast day is approaching. When you read about Mother Teresa's life and read some of the letters she wrote, it is interesting how Mother Teresa revealed quite spectacularly that she sometimes placed herself at the bottom of the wheel of fortune in her relationship with Christ. Did you know that? It seems incredulous to us, no? And it is clear from her letters that she wasn't being disingenuously pious or "fake" in her humility. Her humility was real. My take is, like many saints before her, God helped her to feel what the poor and dying she served felt like inside. With the heart of a mother, she felt for her children. That Mother Teresa felt this way at times, in my opinion, does not lessen her sanctity. On the contrary, I think her letters make her more human and more accessible to us. Newsflash, the saints are human, right? This is why their examples are worth following. How are we to follow their example if they are not human?

And that brings us quite speedily to the point. In Mother Teresa's darkest spiritual moments, ask yourself, how did she respond? As Mother Teresa found herself at the bottom of the wheel of fortune, how did she respond? Did she self-medicate so to attempt to forget her problems? Did she take her Order's credit card and max it out on things that eventually turn to dust? Feeling the way she did at times, did she try to spin her wheel of fortune in vain desperation in ways we often do? No. She responded to her place on the wheel with humility, grounded and centered on the terra firma of a relationship with Jesus. Existentially, she sometimes experienced herself at the bottom of the wheel, and behold, the last has become first, and so can we if we learn from her example.

A good spiritual reflection therefore this coming week could be: where am I currently on the wheel of fortune right now? Are you the king or queen of your mountain, on top of your game, well, that's good, one day you won't be. Are you the unfortunate pauper in the spiritual life, having every kind of bad luck? Well, sorry about that. The good news is things can only get better. Regardless of where I find myself on the wheel of fortune right now, a better question is how grounded am I in my relationship with Jesus?

My friends, a powerful doorway to a deeper relationship with Jesus is the holy Eucharist. In the Eucharist we see the all powerful, all knowing and eternal majesty of God fully and truly present to us in what appears to be simply bread and wine. That's humility. The all powerful God loves us so much that he wants to be as close to us as food and drink. When we receive Christ into our hearts at Communion time, we receive an invitation. Where ever our lives are at right now, no matter if things are going well or going badly in life, no matter where we find ourselves on the Wheel of Fortune: God wants to be incarnate in our hearts through Holy Communion and be food for the journey. And regardless of what seat at table we are invited to right now in life, the invitation is to walk humbly with our God toward the center of our existence where we will find Jesus, who alone can offer us salvation.