

8th Sunday of Ordinary Time “Follow Jesus in Times of Blindness”

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This feels like one of the hardest Sundays I have had to preach in a very long time. Like many of you, I have one eye on my bible and another eye on what is happening in Ukraine. Like many of you, my heart fluctuates from feelings of sadness, worry and to outright anger. As a pastor this weekend, I need to be very careful that when I preach this Gospel, I do so with clear vision. You see, the Gospel this weekend gives us Jesus’ stark warning to beware of blind shepherds. He gives this warning in a very entertaining albeit serious way. It is entertaining because the joke of a blind man leading the blind is both a humorous and tragic image at the same time. What happens if you suffer from blindness, and you let someone else who is blind lead you? The answer is: this will not end well. You will both end up at the bottom of a dark pit, horribly injured together. If you have a splinter in your eye and you go to an optometrist with a sequoia cedar tree sticking out of his own, this also will not end well. That is how we become blind in the first place. Jesus is warning us to be very careful about who we entrust our soul to. Jesus is telling us to be very careful about who we trust.

This important piece of advice can help us in a variety of ways as we navigate the many thorny issues we all struggle with at some point. This message isn’t just about which wise person I should follow. It is also about who can I trust on the evening news who will give me the truth rather than propaganda? As I surf the web, it also means which twitter feed or blog will give me real news and not fake news? On a more personal level, it also means discerning which friendships I am entrusting my soul to who, when the chips are down, will actually be a friend to me in a time of need?

You see, I believe the Gospel this weekend is challenging us to brush the dust off a skillset of academic discipline that I fear is becoming more and more rare, judging from what I see in the media each day. The skillset I am referring to is called the art of critical thinking. Is the person I am listening to telling me the truth? Is the person who is calling me a sinner understand that he or she is also a sinner? Is the shepherd who is telling me I need a savior someone who also recognizes at a very deep and personal level that he or she also needs saving? You see, at the end of the day words do not cut it. The words that people speak are simply not enough.

How do we discern who to follow? Jesus gives us very good advice. Stop focusing on words and start looking at the fruit. A good tree produces good fruit. A bad tree produces bad fruit. Very good advice. The ancients knew this very well. There is an ancient saying from Aristotle that St. Thomas Aquinas frequently employed from his doctrine of God to moral theology. That saying is, *agere sequitur esse*. From Latin, it is literally translated as “action follows being”. You can tell what a tree is by its fruit. Our actions tell people who we are.

My friends, our decisions, the words we use, and our actions tell others who we truly are, what our values are, and what our character consists of. Nothing else but our words and actions tell others who we are. And, if you are looking for someone to trust at your workplace, or which teacher to sit at the feet at in school, or which politician to vote for, or which news reporter to trust, or which preacher you are going to listen to on Sunday, Jesus recommends we focus more on the fruit rather than the words. It is very good advice, and it is a little terrifying for the priest giving this homily.

This is why, as I was preparing this homily, I knew I had to be very careful. This is because I know at a deep level myself that I am, like you, a sinner in need of a savior. We both need Jesus desperately to shed light on who we are and where we are going. Like I said at the beginning, right now I am struggling with what is happening in Ukraine and I am trying as hard as I can to understand how best to be a follower of Jesus here. The Gospel this weekend helped me understand that, maybe my words, my opinions, my preferences, and all of my historical knowledge about the world and this conflict don't matter one iota right now. What matters most right now is not what I say, but what I do. As such, I'll share with you that I made a personal decision to go onto the Catholic Relief Services website (www.crs.org) and donate to their relief fund for families suffering in Ukraine as a consequence of this war. Catholic Relief Services are on the ground with their European partners and so I know that my gift will go to where it is needed most. That is my solution this weekend as to how best to be a disciple of Jesus right now in addition to my prayers for peace. I invite you to consider what God might be calling you to do in the face of this disaster and disasters like it because we are not powerless. Our actions can speak louder than our words.

With so much going on in our world today requiring our prayer, it is fitting that the season of Lent begins with Ash Wednesday this week. Lent is also a time when our actions need to speak louder than our words. For instance, we can tell ourselves and others that we are good Catholics but if we rarely go to Mass or pray, or live the faith, how meaningful are our words? Lent offers us the opportunity to welcome God's grace into our hearts so to truly live the faith in a way we know that is good for us, for our family and for our world. In the next couple days, we can pray what the phrase *agere sequitur esse* looks like for me during Lent this year? The Good News is, even when we feel blind, even when we stumble, and even when we feel afraid and weighed down with worry, Jesus remains the light of the world. Even in times of blindness, we will never, never, never be lost if we in all things follow Jesus, who is the way, the truth, and the life.