

HOMILY: MARCH 2, 2014

Homily Image

I have a friend who, in her imagination, likes to play out what her first day after death would be like in the kingdom. She imagines the Lord greeting her, meeting all of her loved ones who went before her and just settling in. Then, the Lord invites her to a movie theater with popcorn in hand. There Christ and she sit and watch a movie about her life as it has been. After the “reality” movie of her life, Christ shows her another movie. It is what her life should have been.

Looking down the path of life, with Lent so nearby, maybe it is good if one would pull back and assess the life one is living and ask God for wisdom to live the life that God desires.

Homily Reflection

In the charming story, *The Little Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, we are invited to see the world through the eyes of innocence. In this life allegory, a small boy leaves what is familiar to him to venture out into a wider world, to see, to touch, and to be touched. We all know the story of the boy’s coquettish rose that he leaves on his planet to visit other rose bushes that just do not have the same familiarity and intimacy of his own rose back home. His fussy rose, after all, needs the boy’s admiration, his protection, and his nurturing. Through his simple efforts, he falls in love with *his* rose. The little prince discovers in the end, that what he gives his love to and what he gives his time to is where his heart is. In the same way, in the spiritual life, we are invited into single-heartedness, to serve the one true God, whose love is all around. We need only see it!

The temptation is to wander away from such love and to become preoccupied with worry and a kind of lust for a world we often find is not really satisfying. We meander far from God because perhaps we are afraid. Ronald Rolheiser in his most recent book called *Prayer: Our Deepest Longing* (Cincinnati: Franciscan Media, 2013), makes the point that our really biggest worry, the one that is beneath all the other worries is that God will forget us. He likens it to a piece of clothing we discover in our closet after many years: “Oh, I still have this shirt, I had forgotten all about it!” (p. 21). At some place in our deep consciousness we think that God will find us like an old shirt and say: “Oh, I had forgotten that I even created *N.*!” In that time period of thinking we are forgotten, we turn to other things to take over the God-life within us, things like money or technology or whatever else consumes our gray matter behaviors.

Today's readings invite us back into relationship with a very nurturing God, one who is like a mother who never forgets her child. This nurturing God invites us back to fidelity and hope in a God who will take care of our most personal and basic needs: food and clothing. Matthew certainly does not want his community to be given over to worry and fear because he senses it will block growth in one's relationship with the God of love. Worry will starve the mission. In the end, he realizes that thoughts matter.

Among the Cherokee tribal myths there is a story of an old chief who sat down with his grandson to teach him about the moral life. The old man said to the boy that within him there were two wolves, one evil and the other good. The evil wolf, he told the boy, harbors hatred, jealousy, greed, murder, and war. Within the good wolf there lives kindness, peace, compassion, and love. The chief told the boy that those wolves are always in conflict. The boy asked his grandfather, "Well, which one wins?" The old man replied: "The one I feed."

Or as the Buddha would say: "You are what you think."

For those seekers who want to enter the depth of the inner life wherein they can hear the small, still voice of God, it is very important to regard the thoughts that ramble through our heads like unwanted strangers. In the golden age of monks and abbots when true seekers went off to the desert to find God, "to leave all and follow Christ," the worst demons the desert dwellers had to deal with were their thoughts. "Abba Anthony reflects upon the vicissitudes of renouncing wealth, honor, status, relationship and comfort only to discover that in the desert his thoughts turned to wealth, honor, status, relationship and comfort" [Funk, Mary Margaret. *Thoughts Matter* (New York: Continuum, 1998), 15]. Finding solitude in the desert did not quiet his thought life. Abba Anthony discovered he had a second renunciation to attend to.

Saddling one's thought life, the desert fathers and mothers discovered, was no easy effort. It required a deep awareness of the thoughts as they entered their minds, with a way in which to focus upon something more profound. What they discovered was that there were three things they could focus upon in a very disciplined manner so that the outcry of the evil wolf would be silenced. Saint Hugh who popularized the art of praying with the Scriptures (*lectio divina*), focused upon three areas of reflection: nature, experience, and the Scriptures [McGinn, Bernard. *The Growth of Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 386]. It required time and much effort, but certainly took to heart the insights from Matthew's continued sermon and admonition to serve only one master: the God of their ancestors, the God of the cosmos, the God of ultimate love and provision: "*Do not worry about what you are to eat or what you are to drink; look at nature around you and see that the birds of the air are cared for and the flowers in the field are quite beautiful and how much more is my love for you!*"

There it is; sounds so simple. Let go of worry, trust the divine provision, and set your heart and mind on God. The church in its liturgical cycles has such a wonderful sense of the human person. Each year the quiet bells of Lent ring out across the mountains of snow and the oceans of cold. Ash Wednesday looms on the horizon. Those bowls of burnt palm, the fat thumbs of the priest marking us with the paschal symbol of the cross, the long lines of people who have taken their lunch breaks to come to Mass and hear the words from Genesis just one more time: *“For you are dust, and to dust you shall return”* (3:19), the images are timeless. The flecks of charred ash that fall on our cheeks urge us to realize that blackness drifts and like the ashes, we have drifted too.

We go back to our pews, back down snowy roads, to offices filled with nervous connections to business, people, families, and the world. The ashes fall on our keyboards. They fall on our white shirts and into our coffee mugs. We check the forehead cross in the mirror at our bathroom breaks watching it grow smaller and paler. But each time we see that ashen mark, we know it comes with a price, to listen to the call of God to return to innocence, to return to single-heartedness, to return to prayer and to bridling our thought life once again. The upcoming season bids us feed the good wolf.

Mary K. Matestic has a master's of theological studies from St. Francis Seminary. Recently retired as a Pastoral Associate, she continues ministry as a retreat director, writer, teacher, and spiritual director.