

Sunday Homily

17TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

26 JULY 2020

YEAR A

DIVINE OFFICE WEEK I

“He goes and sells everything he owns and buys it.”

Illustration

When St Thérèse of Lisieux was a little girl in the 1870s, she was desperate to enter the religious life. At the age of nine, Thérèse privately informed the prioress of the local Carmelite convent of her desire to become a nun, but the prioress informed her that the minimum age was sixteen. For the next six years Thérèse persisted in her desire, encountering a series of obstacles along the way. Thérèse was certain that her vocation was the method by which she would obtain the kingdom of heaven.

So strong was this conviction that, as time went by, she determined to seek a dispensation to enter the convent earlier than was usual. The superior of the Carmelite convent, however, was adamant in her refusal to consider Thérèse's entry, as were the prioress and the convent's spiritual director. In her disappointment Thérèse persuaded her father to accompany her to put her case before the bishop and his vicar-general. Again, however, she experienced disappointment. The bishop and his assistant talked of waiting and how she ought to continue living with her father a little longer.

Four days later, Thérèse, her father and one of her sisters went on a diocesan pilgrimage to Rome. It was Thérèse's intention to ask the Pope personally for permission to enter the convent. When she knelt before him and when he held out his hand to her she said, “Most Holy Father, in honour of your Jubilee, let me enter Carmel at fifteen.” She went on, “Holy Father, if you said yes, everyone else would be willing.” To this the Pope replied, “Well... well... you will enter if it is God's will.” Meanwhile officials intervened and literally dragged the tearful Thérèse out of the room.

On her return home Thérèse once again wrote to her local bishop and this time received his permission to enter the convent at Lisieux. She did so on 9th April 1888, aged fifteen. Her struggle and determination were finally rewarded. She was on her way to obtaining the kingdom of heaven, as well as sanctity en route. Her story illustrates the truth contained in the first two parables of today's Gospel – how a disciple must joyfully abandon all attachments in order to follow Jesus.

Gospel Teaching

Both parables, of the man who finds treasure hidden in a field and the merchant who discovers a pearl of great value, make the same point: the man and the merchant sell all that they have in order to purchase what they have found. This is the situation of disciples of Jesus. They also have found treasure – the kingdom of heaven – and they are to leave everything to possess it. This same teaching of Jesus occurs later on in the Gospel when Jesus tells a young man, “Sell what you own and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” There can be no half measures.

The third parable in today’s Gospel reading, that of the dragnet, is told by Jesus to illustrate how, here on earth, saints and sinners live side by side. These will be separated by the angels on the last day, just as fishermen separate good and bad fish.

Jesus concludes this section of teaching in Matthew’s Gospel by comparing a scribe, who becomes a disciple, to a householder bringing out of his storeroom things both old and new. Jesus here is probably referring to the teaching that his disciples already have – the Jewish law and the prophets – as things old, and his own instruction to them as things new.

Application

True disciples of Jesus are prepared to put him and the kingdom of heaven first in their lives. On our part this may involve surrendering some of the things to which we are most attached, either in the material sense or in the sense of ideas and ambitions we hold dear. We are encouraged to see this, however, as something that will bring us joy, just as the man who found a treasure in a field went off happily to sell everything he owned, in order to purchase the field.

In our case, becoming disciples of Jesus will bring us similar fulfilment, but it requires courage along the way, just as Thérèse of Lisieux needed it in her quest. In this way we shall then become, as today’s second reading, from St Paul’s letter to the Romans, says, true images of Jesus.