

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Mark Twain once said that he heard a preacher who was powerfully good. He decided to give him every cent he had with him. But the preacher kept at it too long. Ten minutes later, Twain decided to keep the bills and only give the change. Another ten minutes more Twain said, “I was darned if I’d give him anything at all. Then, when he finally stopped and the basket came around, I was so exhausted, I decided to steal \$2 just for spite.”

I have to confess I have a practice that kind of mirrors Mark Twain’s attitude toward preaching. When on vacation and I visit another church for Mass, I go in with a \$5 bill in one pocket and a \$20 bill in the other. If the sermon is just so-so or even stinks, I put the \$5 bill in the basket. If it’s really good, the \$20 bill goes in. On occasion, I’ve happened upon a really excellent sermon which warrants me to put both the \$5 and \$20 bills in the basket. And once last year, I visited a parish in Lancaster where the preaching was so wonderfully moving that I not only put in the 5 and the 20, but pulled out my wallet and drew the largest bill I had in there, and threw another \$50 bill in the basket.

“LORD, MOVE IN ME NOW! GIVE ME THE POWER! LET ME PREACH THAT KIND OF SERMON—A 75 BUCKER!”

One of the biggest problems in sermon preparation is how much to cover. You have four Scripture passages to draw from, including the Responsorial Psalm. Where do you focus?

As you have often heard me say, I see my work, in my preaching, as well as in my ministry “to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. I pray to the Holy Spirit that my words will serve as a catalyst to arouse your curiosity; stir your hearts and/or your minds; and prod you into action on God’s behalf.

So, today I’ve focused my attention, and invite you to consider just the first and last verses of our Gospel text, hearing Jesus speak directly to us:

“Do not be afraid any longer, little flock, for your Father is pleased to give you the kingdom,” and “Much will be required of the person entrusted with much, and still more will be demanded of the person entrusted with more.”

What is imperative here is that we can identify ourselves as the “little flock” to whom the Lord is speaking. In addressing us so tenderly, Jesus is knocking at the doors of our hearts. And he gently speaks to us with the soothing words, “Do not be afraid any longer...”.

In the context of the passage what are the fears we have? Let’s take a look at the reality of our lives. Cell phones, tablets, laptop computers and more keep us connected, informed, and able to shop at any time.

Incessantly, someone or something demands our attention. Whenever the beep, chirp, or musical notes sound, we feel drawn to check in. If not, we might miss something! There is always a treasure waiting for our acknowledgement; someone wanting to befriend us; a nugget of news or laughter coming our way; a new product or “just reduced” price on something we want. These endless noises fill us with fear of not having enough or losing what we have.

Then there are the fears that enter into our relationships. Fear of losing love; feeling unloved; or not being loving enough. Fear of being misunderstood, unappreciated, or hurt by, or hurting, one whom we love.

And, finally, there is the fear that stalks us all. Fear of death, which, for all too many us, means the end of all that we are, that we have, that we hope for.

These are the fears Jesus is addressing when he says, “Do not be afraid any longer, little flock...” and then he tells us why—“for your Father is pleased to give you the kingdom.”

To appreciate what this means in our lives, let’s approach it from the point of view of addressing our ultimate fear, Death Itself. We all know that we are going to die. Imagine, if you will, two elderly people coming to the end of their lives. One is, say, 101, the other is 102. Both had lived long, full, meaningful lives, and their mental faculties were still pretty much in tact up to the end of their days.

One kept everything she had acquired throughout her life. Her house was full. Her two garages were full. Five storage sheds were full. And her bank account was full. Her possessions meant everything to her, and people, not so much. As the end of her life drew near, she begged the doctors to restore her health so that she could continue on as she always had. She was afraid. Afraid of losing her belongings, her wealth, her way of living, she had no peace. When she died, it could literally be said that she was frightened to death.

The other person, as he began to age started giving away the possessions he knew he didn’t need any longer. He eventually sold his home and gave away the proceeds, as well as all his fortune, except for what would be needed to care for him until the end came. He never felt freer in his whole life.

He discussed his impending end-time with his family and friends, speaking of it as the next great adventure in life. Each morning he woke up surprised he was still here, and laughed heartily because he was still on this side of the grass, as he said.

This man died peacefully, with a smile on his face, surrounded by his family, grieving, but rejoicing with him and for him. You see, he believed Jesus when he says, “for your Father is pleased to give you the kingdom.

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ, Jesus is talking to us when he says, “Much will be required of the person entrusted with much, and still more will be demanded of the person entrusted with more.” Whatever blessings God has showered on us in this life, we have to see he does not intend it for us alone, but rather to build up his Kingdom, which it has pleased him to have already given us. We are merely the stewards of those blessings. To think otherwise is the vanity of which we were told last week from the Book of Ecclesiastes: “For here is one who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill, and that one’s legacy must be left to another who has not toiled for it.”

Here I am reminded of the man who entrusted to each of his three sons \$2,000,000.00, with the instruction that they were to make sure to bury \$1,000,000.00 of the bequest with him. The first two sons came with satchels of cash that they poured into the Father’s coffin. The third simply drew an envelope from his pocket and placed it in the coffin. The first two brothers were mystified: “What are you doing? Where’s the million dollars?” “Right there,” he said. “I wrote a check!” Vanity of vanities! All things are vanity!

Folks, you can’t take it with you! Whose kingdom are you building with the blessings God has given you? One of your own? Or are you building up the Kingdom that the Father is already pleased to have given you? Is God being glorified in your generous sharing of those blessings or are you merely satisfying yourself. It really is easy to figure out for yourselves. Are you at peace or are you still filled with fears, Little Flock?