

A sermon preached by Father Dwight D. Duncan, ssc - Rector, St Matthias, Dallas, Texas

9/25/2005

PENTECOST 19

Phil. 2:1-13; Matt. 18:21-35, A #21

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus ... who became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Phil. 2:5,8

Years ago, at a conference in my former diocese, a priest leading one of the study groups shared with us a word which once had been spoken to him by God, through another priest. This priest then was but a few years younger than I now am, which, you all know, is sixty. The priest who had spoken God's word to him was about Father Houk's age, thirty-five. And when I heard this word, I was then still a callow young priest, not yet thirty.

As soon as I heard the word, I knew that, if for no other in that room, God intended the word for me. I knew this not because of any sanctified wisdom of mine, but solely because of God's grace. The word both spoke to who I then was and what I wanted for myself. Of course, up until that moment, I thought what I wanted for myself was certainly what God wanted for me. While holiness of life and being a good priest were on my career goals, they were in hot competition with becoming, at the least, a bishop of a "significant" diocese.

Now, what was the word? Not yet ... I'm going to tease you a bit more, because you need to know the context in which it was first spoken. The word had been spoken to the priest at a time when he was fleeing from his parish. It was a parish which had become widely known and lauded for what it had become and what it had done under his leadership. He had tried very hard to make it a community which was a "success for the Lord." Later, he would realize he had done it most for himself. At the time God's word was spoken to him, the parish was a shambles, physically and spiritually.

On his flight, the priest stopped at a church to try to pray. There, in the shadows, he was found, weeping, by the parish's priest. Soon he was pouring out his sorrow to this young man, who listened attentively, saying very little. But as the priest got up to continue his escape from failure, the young priest placed his hands on his shoulders, looked into his eyes, and said, "Father, God doesn't want you to succeed in anything. He wants you only to be obedient."

That was the word. The priest recognized it immediately and appropriated it. It became the turning point of his life. While the parish never returned to its former glory and the priest could never return to it, yet he became a blessing to many of us young, callow priests. God be praised.

"God doesn't want you to succeed in anything. He wants you only to be obedient." That is God's word to you, his beloved sons and daughters, as well as to young, callow priests. It is inescapable in today's lessons. We have a gospel about two sons, only one of whom did the will of his father, and that after first he had said no. And this word is at the heart of today's second lesson, from St Paul's letter to our forebears of the church at Philippi.

Paul's words are an expansion of an early hymn in the Christian community, a hymn in honor of Jesus, a hymn which culminates in ecstatic praise for Jesus' high exaltation by his Father for, we might say, his "job-well-done":

Therefore, Paul says, God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Ah, but this "success" of Jesus is **not** the hymn's point. Listen:

Though ... in the form of God, [Jesus] did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.

You've got it, haven't you? The point is not the success of Jesus, but the obedience of Jesus. Or, we might say, the success of Jesus is PRECISELY his obedience, whatever its cost, in this earthly life, to himself.

But, of course, that is not the whole point is it? NO. Paul's word began how? With this injunction: "Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus." To have the "mind of Christ" ... **that** is the center-point. And what is that mind? NOT success. OBEDIENCE.

"God does not want you to succeed in anything. He wants you only to be obedient."

You and I are the ones who so desperately want *success*. Each one of us has our own image and bag of specifics for that. But we want it. How we want it! We think it measures our worth, while in fact the depth of our pursuit of it only measures our insecurity with ourselves.

And our groping after it perverts us, forcing us to repeat again and again the primary sin which felled us in the first place: self-idolatry. To gain our "success" we must concentrate on ourselves, putting ourselves at the center of our world and manipulating others. In the process we must either compromise or disregard anything or anyone who would hinder the achievement of our goal.

And at the point of equality among us all: death, our pursuit of success gets us nowhere and offers us nothing. Prince and pauper, industrial magnate and assembly -line worker, bishop and small parish priest ... all die and return to that dust out of which we were formed, that dust which God alone can reconstitute in an eternal body. But that he can only do if the soul which inhabited it has totally surrendered itself to him and is able to say to him at the Day of Judgment, and really mean it, "Nothing, O Lord, in my hands I bring. Solely to thy cross I cling. Lord, have mercy upon me."

“God does not want you to succeed in anything. He wants you only to be obedient.” What a life-giving and life-saving word ... a word which directs us to eternal life. Only God knows what finally he wants for us. Only God knows the contours and details of the self he has created each of us to be.

Yes, only God knows what finally he wants *for* us. But he, and we, know what he wants *from* us, for it is this which will grow us into the person he has created us to be: **obedience**. That is what he wanted from his Son ... that is what his Son gave him ... and it was that gift of Jesus to his Father which won salvation for you and for me.

“God does not want you to succeed in anything. He wants you only to be obedient.” You and I do not have to prove ourselves to anyone ... not even to ourselves. But one day, in response to our obedience, God will approve us before the hosts of heaven. And that will be the day of our success.