

“Righteousness”

Homily of December 10, 2006

by Fr. Brian Joyce

I want to talk about two words. One of them is in English and one is not. Have you noticed the cover of the bulletin that has a different theme each weekend during Advent? Last weekend, it was “Come O Lord, O Justice.” And Brian Timoney spoke about justice and harmony. Next weekend, it will be “Come O Lord, O Joy.” In fact, Father Aidan is asking for people to turn in stories of joy in their lives so he can make you famous. And, on the last weekend of Advent, Father Dibble will be talking about “Come O Lord, our Peace.” I feel like I got cheated. You know, people know right away that justice, peace and joy are about and they are all for it.

But “righteousness” is a little tricky. It is drawn from the first reading that you heard at today’s Mass when Paul wishes that we “would be filled with the fruit of righteousness through Jesus Christ for the praise and glory of God.” But the word “righteousness” which is supposed to be positive, I think, through the years, has gotten in the English language, pretty contaminated. When you say “He is so righteous,” or someone is “self-righteous” it means somebody thinks they are better than you or they are uppity or they are stuck-up or, very best, they are just not nice. The words “righteous” and “righteousness” have been contaminated. The “righteousness” was invented by a man by the name of William Tyndale. He was born in 1492. He was one of the early translators of the Bible from Hebrew and Greek into English. And he came across a word, in Hebrew first of all, in the Old Testament. It came up five hundred times. And the same word came up in Greek two hundred times. And there was no English word for it. The closest thing to it was “rightwise” or “rightward” or “right-standing” or “right behavior.” So he coined a brand new term that had never been used in English “righteousness.”

But, I said that righteousness which is about our right ways and right behavior and right standing has become “stuck-up” and self-righteous. It has been somewhat redeemed by the Jewish people. At their memorial museum and shrine, Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, which is there to document and not lose track of the victims of the Holocaust, there on the Mount of Remembrance, they added “The Avenue of the Righteous” and they selected and named people who they call “The Righteous of the Nations,” people who risked their lives during the Second World War, who were non-Jews, to save Jewish people. The most famous among them is Oskar Schindler from “Schindler’s List” and Raoul Wallenberg from Scandinavia. But there are actually over ten thousand names on “The Avenue of the Righteous.”

When I think of the Righteous, I think of Father Bill O’Donnell, my good friend who died just three years ago this week. When he died, the newspaper described him as the “Saint of the Labor Movement” or the “Conscience of Berkeley.” He had already been arrested two hundred twenty-five times, protesting for peace for human rights, for workers’ rights, for justice and for closing of the School of the Americas. Just before his death at age seventy-four, he spent six months in Federal Prison for that. Last Friday, the day before yesterday the anniversary of his death, thirty of us gathered at his gravesite in the wind and the rain and the cold and we listened together to a tribute to him that KPFA broadcast on Friday on the radio and an interview that he gave just before he died. We sang “Danny Boy” by his grave and we shared memories. One of the memories that a woman had shared was that she came up to him once and said, “With so much injustice in the world, with so much suffering, so much torture, so much death, so much wrong with the world, how can you possibly be in God?” And he just smiled and he said, “God is our very best friend.” God is our best friend. Jesus embodies the righteousness of God. Jesus embodies for us the right way of looking at things, the right way of setting things right and calls us to follow that way. May God help us to keep trying to get things right in our world.

The second phrase I want to share with you, or the second word, is “Maranatha.” It’s also on the cover of the bulletin. Now it’s not in English. It’s Aramaic Hebrew. It’s interesting. That’s the mother tongue of Jesus. That’s the language Jesus spoke. Now, most of us, we talk about the word of the Lord or the gospel or the words of Jesus, we never, ever, ever, ever hear the words of Jesus. Never. I mean, you read the gospel in English. Jesus did not know how to speak English. And the gospels themselves, when they were written, were written in Greek. As far as we know, Jesus did not know how to speak Greek. But a few phrases were kept treasured by the early Christian community, right off the lips of Jesus. Right offhand, I could list five. One is obviously “Amen.” That’s an Aramaic word, “Amen, Amen I say to you...” Another is “Hosanna,” which means “Hurray.” Jesus must have said “Hosanna” a few times and it was said to him. “Halleluia” means “Praise Yahweh... Praise God.” My favorite is “Abba.” The New Testament keeps that in the scene where Jesus is praying to his father and praying in the Garden of Gethsemane. He calls out, “Abba.... Abba.” That’s the Aramaic word, not for Father, but for “Daddy.” And what’s so great is then St. Paul comes along in his letter and he says, “Now, if you have been baptised in Jesus and have received the Spirit of adoption, God, you should call out ‘Abba!’ ” Call God “Daddy.” That’s great. And then there’s this other word, “Maranatha.” Maranatha appears only once in the whole Bible. It’s in St. Paul, and it’s a greeting. As far as we know, it became a regular greeting for the first hundred years of Christianity. The early Christians, when they greeted one another, they said, “Maranatha.... May the Lord come. Come, come Lord Jesus,” because they were full of confidence and expectation that the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ, would come again. In fact, the final lines of the Bible are not in Aramaic. They are in Greek, but the final lines of the whole Bible are “Come Lord Jesus.” Our sign as Christians and our signature, among other things, should include expectation and confidence and hope that the Lord Jesus will come.

Let me tell you a story. Early on, there was a great Rabbi who preached constantly on the coming of the Messiah, that the Messiah would come and change the world. And this little boy ran up to him finally and said (He pleaded with him and said...) “Rabbi, Rabbi, Master, tell me when will the Messiah come? When will everything get changed?” And the Rabbi said to him, “My son, today the Messiah is coming. Today, the Messiah will come.” And the little boy said, “Master, tell me, where will he come and how will I recognize him?” And the Rabbi said, “He will come at the city gates and you will recognize him because he is standing among the poor and the needy.” So, the little boy ran out, full of hope and expectation, waiting for every change and for the Messiah to arrive. He waited and he waited and he waited. As the day grew longer, he got worried and he worried and he worried, and as the sun set and the day ended, he became angry. And he ran back to the Master and he said, “Master, you lied to me or the Messiah lied to me. The Messiah has not come. Nothing has changed. Everything is the same.” And the Master said, “My son, unless you can recognize him among the poor and the needy, the Messiah can never come at all.” Now, we’re preparing for the coming of the Messiah. We’re preparing for the celebration of Christmas. But really, we’re not preparing for him coming to us. What we are preparing for is us coming to him. The question is not so much “Has he come yet? ...Is he here yet?” but, “Are we there yet? ...Are we there yet?” Maranatha. Come Lord Jesus. Help us to get it right.