

Sunday: 5 B

Admission to Lectorate and Acolyte

SCK, Westminster Abbey

4 February 2018

Dear Father Abbot, brother priests and monks of the Abbey,
seminarians, dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

Introduction

Before instituting Richard Conlin, Raffaele Salvino and Joshua Van Vliet as lectors, and Felix Min as acolyte, I would like to thank both the Benedictine monks here at the Abbey, as well as their parents and families, for the prayerful guidance and support they have given these young men. Today they are publicly taking one further step on their path to the priesthood. All of us join with them in invoking the grace of the Holy Spirit, that he will continue to lead them on their journey to Ordination.

Gospel

The Gospel today presents Jesus who, after preaching on the Sabbath in the synagogue of Capernaum, goes to the house of Simon and Andrew. There he finds Simon's mother-in-law sick with fever, which was undoubtedly life-threatening.

Jesus heals her by taking her by the hand. He touches her and helps her up; that is, he "raised her up" – a foreshadowing of his own triumph over death in his Resurrection. Her reaction is a model of discipleship, the appropriate reaction of anyone healed by Jesus, spiritually or

physically: to spend “oneself in service of the Lord.”¹

But look what happens. The whole town hears of her healing and rushes all their sick to Peter’s house. The Gospel says that by the evening the whole city was gathered at the door of Peter’s house (Mk 1:33). Mark records that Jesus healed very many of them, and well into the night.

Jesus then left the house well before daylight and went to a secluded place to pray. He was so besieged by those who wanted healing that he couldn’t pray in the house. And he needed to pray, not to please the Father, “but to abandon himself to the eternal love of the Father in which he exists with the Holy Spirit.”² When his absence was finally detected, his disciples went looking for him. “Hey,” they say when they find him, “Everybody is searching for you” (Mk 1:37). They seem to think that his urgent-care clinic should be open at all hours.

Of course, it is a good work to heal the sick. And, of course, those who love the sick rightly want them healed. This healing ministry that began with Jesus has continued down through the centuries to the present day. Through the sacraments of the Church, it is still Jesus who heals and comforts the sick and suffering in families and health-care

¹ Cf. Mary Healy, *The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids: BakerAcademic, 2008), 51.

² *Praying with the Gospel of Mark* (New York: Magnificat, 2011), 32.

facilities inspired by his example.

And yet Jesus points out another, more important lesson during his stay in Capernaum. I think he wants to tell us how absurd it is to suppose that prayer should take second-place to work, no matter how important that work might be.

Each healing Jesus performed was a good thing, a sign – but only a sign – that the Kingdom was near at hand (cf. Mk 1:15). But doing good things can sometimes get in the way of serving God as he wills. What do I mean? To serve God well, we have to do not just any good things that others want us to do. We have to do those good things that God has called us to do. One unsurpassable good he calls us to is prayer, time spent “abiding” with him, just as Jesus was in communion with the Father.

Pope Benedict made a very important point in a meeting with the Roman clergy when he affirmed that prayer itself is not just a prelude or postlude to apostolic activity, something we do before and after, but that it *is* pastoral activity – a healthy reminder to the busy seminarian and priest – and, indeed to all of us. “Spending time in God’s presence in prayer is a real pastoral priority; it is not an addition to pastoral work: being before the Lord is a pastoral priority and in the final analysis, the

most important.”³ And on another occasion he said: “Let us not be consumed with haste, as if time dedicated to Christ in silent prayer were time wasted. On the contrary, it is precisely then that the most wonderful fruits of pastoral service come to birth.”⁴

In a busy life it takes prayer to figure out which good things have to be turned down in favour of giving primacy to the Lord.

How did the disciples react to Jesus’ going to the deserted place to pray? They didn’t yet understand. They felt that Jesus should hurry back to the village to keep curing the sick. What Jesus tells them, after his prayer, is that he is leaving Peter’s village to continue his ministry – this time, at least, not to heal but to proclaim the coming of the Kingdom of God: “Let us go to the neighbouring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do” (Mk 1:39).

In order to serve God well, therefore, what is needed is not an endless doing of good things that other people want or expect from you. What is needed for the Lord’s service first of all is prayer,⁵ “which is to

³ Benedict XVI, Meeting with the Clergy of Rome (13 May 2005). He repeated almost identical words a year later: “The time we spend on this is truly a time of pastoral activity, authentic pastoral activity. The priest must above all be a man of prayer” (Homily at Christ Mass [13 April 2006]).

⁴ Benedict XVI, Meeting with Clergy at Warsaw (25 May 2006).

⁵ Cf. Eleonore Stump, “Glancing Thoughts: The Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time B (4 February 4 2018): http://www.liturgy.slu.edu/5OrdB020418/reflections_stump.html.

say, without a personal relationship with God nothing else can function,” again to cite Pope Benedict, “for we cannot truly bring God, the divine reality or true human life to people unless we ourselves live them in a deep, true relationship of friendship with God in Jesus Christ.”⁶

Moreover, when all is said and done, “the faithful expect only one thing from priests: that they be specialists in promoting the encounter between man and God.”⁷

Conclusion

Dear friends: we now proceed to the institution of Richard, Raffaele and Josh as readers or lectors; and to the institution of Felix as acolyte. Let us pray for them: that they will be faithful to the ministries entrusted to them to serve at the Table of the Word and the Table of the the Eucharist.

✦ J. Michael Miller, CSB
Archbishop of Vancouver

⁶ Benedict XVI, Meeting with the Priests of the Dioceses of Belluno-Feltre and Treviso (24 July 2007).

⁷ Benedict XVI, Address to Clergy in Warsaw (25 May 2006): *L'Osservatore Romano*, English edition, 22 (31 May 2006), 4.