

Sunday 31-A

Spirit Day

Chandos Auditorium

5 November 2017

Dear brothers in the priesthood, and dear young people of the Archdiocese of Vancouver, together with so many volunteers, your parents and teachers in our Catholic schools and catechists in our PREP program to whom I owe enormous gratitude for their role in passing on the beauty of the Catholic faith to you:

Introduction

After reflecting on the readings and the theme the organizers have chosen for Spirit Day this year, I have just three brief points to make in this homily. And each one can be summed up in three words. God is great. You are great. Greatness is service. Got that? God is great. You are great. Greatness is service.

God Is Great

We get a clue of God's "greatness" in today's first reading from the Old Testament Prophet Malachi: "I am a great King, says the Lord of hosts" (Mal 1:14). He is "a great King," language people used more than 2000 years ago to express God's greatness. Nowadays we can express our awe before God by looking at the wonder of creation.

From your study of science you know something about how vast in size and how old in time our universe is. It is almost beyond imagining. Yet it had a beginning those billions upon billions of years ago. God

himself created all of it. Look at creation and see there the evidence of the greatness of God. Ponder the mighty power of God displayed in the world he has made.

Our Creeds make this affirmation, “I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.” The whole universe has been put in place by a divine Maker. Behind the design there is a Designer. Behind the order there is One who made it so.

And he not only created everything, he continues to do so. God is great! Jesus asks us in the Sermon on the Mount, “Who feeds those birds of the air?” Chance? No, “it is your heavenly Father who feeds those birds.” The entire structure of creation is created, sustained, maintained, governed, and ruled by God.

But God’s greatness shines out even more in the history of salvation. The greatness of God is revealed in his dealings with his people. He called a Chosen People, made a Covenant with them, gave them the Commandments, and promised a Messiah.

That Messiah came in Jesus, when the very Son of God became man. A man like us, born in poverty, destined to die, and die in a horrible way to save us. Who else but a great and loving God would do that?

One beautiful prayer of the Church says that God displays his might and power above all by showing mercy. Only a true great God

would do this, a God who does not stand on his prerogatives but is able, in Jesus, to surrender his greatness by uniting himself with creation. Out of love for us, the Creator became a creature!

Yes, our God is truly great, for he knows each and every human being before the earth was created. He is the One who sees every sparrow that falls, knows our every thought, and the number of hairs in our head.

“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” the Beginning and the End, says the Lord God, “who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty” (Rev 1:8).

God is powerful, amazing, indescribable, incomparable, and yet these are only a few words that describe his greatness.

You Are Great

But not only is God great, he has given us a share in his greatness. We, too, are great, though with a small or lower-case “g.”

The biggest reason why we can claim to be great is not that we are great at school or sports or music or some other activity but because God himself created us. And he created us in his image and likeness. By doing so, he showed his love.

We can claim to be great, not from our accomplishments, but because he made us. To be the object of God’s love is to be great.

And our greatness increases when he re-creates us with the gift of

Baptism, when we more truly become his daughter or his son. St. John calls us “children of God,” and Jesus himself says that we can call God our “Father.”

You are great. Remember that. You have received greatness as a gift. You didn’t bring yourself into existence; you didn’t baptize yourself or just pronounce yourself a child of God. All of this is given to you.

And, through the years, he has proved his friendship. He has continued to give you gifts. In the Eucharist, he has nourished you with heavenly food, the Bread of life, his own Body and Blood. When you have strayed by doing wrong, by committing sins, he has not shut you out, but offered you forgiveness in the Sacrament of Reconciliation when you confess your sins.

Sometimes we have dark moments or even days when we forget our greatness. We might think that no one accepts us, or understands us or even loves us. Those are the times when we have to sit back and say. “No, that’s not right.” Then we remember that God has made me “great,” his son or daughter, and he says – even if not in words – “You are important to me. I’m here. I have given you a share in my greatness.”

Just think of this. You never have to wake up in the morning and say, “God, are You going to love me today?” He always does, because he is great.

3. Greatness Is Service

While certainly our “greatness” lies in God’s creating us and saving us, he does expect something from us in return. He wants us to show gratitude for our greatness. And he tells us how to do this: by being servants of others. This is what Jesus says in the Gospel from St. Matthew: “The greatest among you will be your servant” (Mt 23:11).

The Lord Jesus presented himself to the world as a servant, completely stripping himself and lowering himself to give, on the Cross, the most eloquent lesson of humility and love. His example tells us, who only share in his greatness, how we ought to act: “He who is greatest among you shall be your servant” (Mt 23:11).

You are – we all are – members of God’s great family, the Church. No matter how much or how little we have individually, each one of us is called to personally reach out and serve our brothers and sisters in need. There is always someone near us who is in need, materially, emotionally, spiritually. The greatest gift we can give to them is our friendship, our concern, our tenderness, our love for Jesus. To receive Jesus is to have everything; to give him is to give the greatest gift of all.

Dear confirmands of the Archdiocese of Vancouver: you are being called to the greatness of being servants. And what does that mean? To be a friend of God like the Saints and, like them, to go out and serve others: “the greatest among you will be your servant” (Mt 23:11).

Think, for example of Mary. Once she received the message of the angel and said “yes” to the call to become the Mother of the Saviour, she did not sit back satisfied that about her extraordinary share in God’s greatness. No, she set out in haste to visit her cousin Elizabeth, who was in the sixth month of her pregnancy (cf. 1:36, 39). What she was told was a great gift to her, but it also entailed great challenges. The Lord assured her of his presence and support, yet many things remained obscure in her mind and heart. Mary was not the type that, to be comfortable, needed a good sofa where she could feel safe and sound.¹ If her elderly cousin needed a hand, she did not hesitate, but immediately set out.²

That’s the secret of Mary’s “greatness,” the secret of all the Saints. That’s why she could proclaim, “The Lord has done great things for me.” Like every Saint down through the history of the Church, those recognized and the millions known only to the heart of God, their greatness consisted in placing others at the centre of their world, being neither self-absorbed nor selfish.

And that’s the calling of each of us. To accept our greatness as God’s free gift, and to show our gratitude for the gift by serving others.

¹ Cf. Francis, Address at the Vigil for World Youth Day, Kraków (30 July 2016).

² Cf. Francis, Message for the 2017 World Youth Day.

See You Next Year!

To those of you who you are preparing to receive the Sacrament of Confirmation this spring, today I promise you my prayers.

With the invaluable help of your parents and teachers, you are getting ready to receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit, who will give you added strength so that you will be better equipped to witness to your faith in Jesus as your Friend and to the Good News brought by him. At Confirmation you will become full-fledged, responsible members of the Catholic Church.

I urge you in the next few months to prepare well for receiving this Sacrament. You can receive it only once, even though its graces, the gifts it brings, will continue to work in you throughout your life.

So, I leave you with one suggestion. In the next few months, think of yourselves to be like the Apostles gathered with Mary, who were praying in the Upper Room in Jerusalem. They were praying and waiting for the coming of the Holy Spirit whom Jesus had promised to give to them, so that they could go forth and proclaim his message to everyone. The proof of their success is the fact that we are here today, waiting for the same outpouring of the Spirit on your Confirmation. I hope that you, too, are praying – not in the Upper Room in Jerusalem but in your homes – with your parents and brothers and sisters – so that you will be ready to receive so great a Gift.

Conclusion

Let's now continue this Mass with thanksgiving for the greatness of God, and our call to live out our own greatness in service to others.

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