

Bishop Bradley's Reflections on the Sunday Readings

October 11, 2015 10:00 a.m. St. Mark Parish, Niles

60th Anniversary of the Parish/28th Sunday in Ordinary Time

What a joyful and happy occasion this is as we come together to celebrate the 60th anniversary of this important Parish here in Niles. I am very grateful to Father Tom King and Brother Dennis Myers for inviting me to join you for this happy event. I'm also very honored to be here with so many of my brother priests, both our diocesan priests who are here: Fr. Richard Altine, Pastor of St. Anthony Parish in Buchanan as well as the Dean of this Southwest Deanery, along with Fr. Don Potts, the Pastor Emeritus of St. Ann Parish in Cassopolis. In addition, I am particularly honored to be joined here by a number of Fr. King's and Brother Dennis' confreres, priests of the Congregation of the Holy Cross: Fr. Richard Warner, the Superior General of the Holy Cross Congregation throughout the world; Fr. Tom O'Hare, the Local Provincial, along with Fathers Heppen, Tyson, Moss and Epping. I'm sure they all look even more happy than usual on this beautiful Sunday morning in light of Notre Dame's victory yesterday over Navy! Beginning with Fr. King and Brother Dennis, I have always been so inspired by this wonderful religious community of the Holy Cross priests. St. Mark Parish is very indebted to you for your pastoral and sacramental care of and assistance to this parish over the course of the parish's history (not to mention the service you provide to several other parishes here in our Diocese, for which we are very grateful!) through your priests and seminarians. Over and above we are grateful for the service of the Holy Cross nuns who were on Staff here for many years. Especially for these last little more than 20 years, we are particularly grateful that the Pastor of St. Mark has been one of the Holy Cross priests, Fr. Joseph Koma for 13 years, 1994-2007 (may he rest in peace) and now Fr. King since 2007, who is only the 6th pastor of this great parish. We hope and pray the wonderful relationship with this great community continues for as long as possible.

On anniversaries such as this, marking 60 years of history, we can't help but think back to what it must have been like for Fr. Francis Timmons way back on July 20, 1955 when Bishop Albers, the Bishop of Lansing, established St. Mark as a parish and appointed Fr. Timmons as the first pastor with nothing much more than a parcel of land and a few thousand dollars (\$9,000) to get a parish started.

Within the first couple years, the temporary church (now the parish hall) and rectory were built, and by Thanksgiving Day in 1968, only 13 years after the parish was established, this beautiful church----which as I understand it benefited from the design talents of some of those in the Art Department at Notre Dame--- was built.

Much has happened here at St. Mark Parish, and throughout the world, over these 60 years. In 1955, when St. Mark was established, the Second Vatican Council had not yet been called for, the Space Program was just getting off the ground, and there was no such thing as computers, the internet or cell phones.

But all during these past 60 years, throughout Ecumenical Councils, major changes in the Universal Church and all the world events that have taken place, including going from being a part of the Diocese of Lansing to being a part of the Diocese of Kalamazoo when it was established in 1971, St. Mark Parish has been here teaching the Catholic faith, preaching the Gospel of Jesus, and inviting people to be an active part of the Church and a participating member of the Body of Christ.

This is where generations of people have had their babies baptized, their children instructed in the faith, and their young people confirmed as fully-initiated Catholics. This is where people have found Christ's forgiveness in the Sacrament of Penance, where couples have entered into the Sacrament of Matrimony and, thru the grace of that sacrament, have raised up families for the Lord; and this is where countless numbers of funeral Masses have been celebrated when faithful parishioners' lives in this world have been completed, and their bodies have been laid to rest while their souls have found their new and eternal life in the Resurrection of Jesus. This is where people of all ages have come to encounter the Lord Jesus Himself in all the sacraments, and most especially, in the tens of thousands of Celebrations of the Holy Eucharist which has spiritually sustained and sacramentally nourished parishioners throughout these six decades.

All of that is why this place----this parish church----is a sacred place, a true dwelling of God in the midst of His People. St. Mark Parish has been, and continues to be, the spiritual home for all those who have gone before us, those of you here now, and all those who will come to be---the place where people are able to confront the questions of life with eternal implications and where, as people of faith, we are able to encounter and deepen our relationship with the Lord Jesus Himself.

Today's Scripture Readings from God's Holy Word are so perfect for this joyful celebration.

In Today's First Reading from the Book of Wisdom, we heard God's Word challenge us to be mindful of and committed to what is most important in life----what is of lasting value? So the Holy Author wrote: *I prayed....I pleaded....I preferred wisdom and prudence to anything else in life---more important than scepter, throne, riches, gold, silver, health or beauty.*" It is the wisdom that we receive from God's Holy Spirit that helps us, in the midst of our human lifetime, to remember that all the "things of this world," all the "material possessions" we happen to amass throughout our lives, all the accomplishments we achieve---none of that matters if we have not been "wise" and "prudent" enough to live our lives in rightful relationship with God by living according to God's ways throughout our lives.

And in today's Gospel passage, we hear the very familiar story of "the Rich Young Man." He seemed to have it all: he had youth, possessions, good health---and yet, he knew there was "more"; and so he *ran up to Jesus as Jesus was journeying along the road, knelt right down on the ground, and asked "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"*

The conversation that went on between Jesus and the Young Man is very important---a "back and forth" dialogue---a kind of one-on-one seminar that we get to listen in on.

Listening to God's Word which challenges us with questions about what is of lasting value, and encountering the Lord Himself with the ultimate questions of life----*that* is what St. Mark Parish is here for.

Faith is all about helping us to "see" life from God's perspective----"see" beyond this world. faith is about helping us to live our lives in this world in such a way that we already enter into the "eternal life of God", even while we're living in the here and now, dealing with our day-to-day responsibilities of life.

When we celebrate the Eucharist as people of faith, when we come here to be instructed in our faith, to be supported by the community of faith, and to be motivated to live our faith with joy in our daily activities and responsibilities, that's when *this* parish, or any parish, is living up to what it's purpose is.

When the Rich Young Man asked that most important question, Jesus didn't try to "sell" him a slick package of goods just so that he would sign up to be one of His followers. St. Mark told us that "*Jesus looked at him, loved him, and*" told him the Truth: keep the Commandments----live according to the teachings of your faith--- divest yourself of control by the possessions of your life in this world----and follow Me.

Our faith is not about finding easy ways to live our lives, or finding shortcuts to get to Heaven. It's challenging, and it takes a lifetime of conversion----a lifetime of practice before we get it right. Jesus Himself tells us that it's difficult---"*Children, how hard it is to enter the Kingdom of God.*" It's not "hard" because it's so complicated; it's hard because it's difficult for us to choose to turn away from sinful practices so that we can follow Jesus' bottom-line commandment: "Love God with your whole heart, soul, mind and strength; Love your neighbor as you love yourself." Jesus tells us that we have to make some difficult choices if we want to "follow Him". He also tells us: "*For human beings, it is impossible, but not for God. All things are possible for God.*" If we try to do things on our own, we'll never be able to make it. But, if, as we heard in today's First Reading, we "pray and plead and prefer" God's Spirit of Wisdom more than anything else---if we choose to allow God to guide us through the Church, and in particular, through the sacramental life we experience here at the parish, we will find the way to eternal life.

I'm sure we're all still enjoying the wonderful memories of Pope Francis' visit to the United States just a couple weeks ago, and of course, as we know, he is now back in Rome listening to the world-wide consultation that is taking place on the mission and vocation of marriage and the family at the Ordinary Synod. But one of the things that Pope Francis loves to talk about is how important the practice of our faith is in the parish. This is how he described the parish: "The parish is the presence of the Church in a given territory, an environment for hearing God's Word, for growth in the Christian life, for dialogue, proclamation, charitable outreach, worship and celebration. In all its activities, the parish encourages and trains its members to be evangelizers. It is a community of communities, a sanctuary where the thirsty come to drink in the midst of their journey, and a center of constant missionary outreach."

That's quite a description, isn't it? St. Mark Parish fits that description in many ways---you are the Presence of the Church here in Niles, in this part of the Diocese of Kalamazoo; this *is* where you come to hear God's Word and grow in faith. For 60 years, through the leadership of six pastors, and a number of bishops, the faithful of St. Mark Parish have celebrated your faith, reached out in charitable outreach to those in need, and passed on your faith to your children and their children.

But there's always more challenges to meet, aren't there? It's clear that our greatest challenge these days is reaching out to those of our families and community who have fallen away from the practice of the faith---our challenge is to help our young people to not be detoured along their life journey in pursuit of a life of possessions or pleasures of other sorts---

our challenge is to go out, as Pope Francis urges all of us to do, to the peripheries---to the margins of society---to those who have never heard the Good News of the Gospel, and give witness to our faith---in other words, to become evangelizers. And our challenge, more and more, is to be willing to defend the faith, and our right to practice and live our faith, in a growingly secularized world that wants nothing to do with God.

Today we celebrate the glorious and wonderful 60th anniversary of this great parish and all that, through the grace of God, has taken place here. But there is so much more to do. Let us also pray during this Mass of Celebration---let us “pray and plead”---that we will remain faithful in following Jesus, and not “*go away sad because we have too many possession*”.

Let us give thanks today for this great parish---let us give thanks for all those who have gone before us who worked so hard to provide this “sanctuary where the thirsty come to drink in the midst of their journey,” as Pope Francis described it. May St. Mark Parish be blessed and continue to be the place where people of all ages and for generations to come will be able to ask the questions such as “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” and to be able to encounter our Loving Lord Who looks at each of us with love and assures us that as long as we stay close to Him, and follow Him, “all things are possible with God.”

God bless you, now and always!

Faithfully yours in Christ,

+ Bishop Paul J. Bradley