

Homily based on the readings from September 3, 2023 (Jeremiah 20.7-9; Romans 12.1-2; Matthew 16.21-27)

Those of us – who are old enough – have probably passed through certain phases of our lives that, in hindsight, we would just as soon forget. Looking back ten or twenty years, we are often appalled by the clothing we wore, the hairstyles we had, the music we listened to, the television we watched. These choices must have seemed like good ideas at the time, but with a bit of distance – and a degree of honesty – many of them are inscrutable and even embarrassing.

On a more serious level, if we look back through history, there are countless examples of poor decisions – not just relating to fashion and culture – but to matters of life and death. Consider the perennial persecution of the Jewish population in Europe or the horrors of slavery and racial segregation in our own country. These were not just misdeeds perpetrated by a small number of powerful individuals, but practices that enjoyed broad support from a substantial majority of the population.

From our perspective here and now, it is almost impossible to understand how so many people could have been so wrong about so much.

It is easy – and beguilingly safe – to sit in judgment of people who came fifty or a hundred or two hundred years before us. It is much more difficult to apply that same sort of scrutiny to ourselves. We would do well to spend some time contemplating what common practices from our own age will be viewed as unimaginably horrific in a couple of generations. Abortion and capital punishment certainly top the list, but there are probably too many items to name. Whether these practices are popular or unpopular is totally irrelevant. I recently read a headline from the United Kingdom saying that two-thirds of residents now support assisted suicide. That does not mean that assisted suicide has become morally acceptable in Britain – just that two-thirds of Britons have lost their appreciation for the sanctity of life.

As Christians, our lifelong challenge is to be *in the world* but not *of the world*. In other words, we need to free ourselves from any forces or influences that are pulling us away from God's will. Saint Paul describes this exact situation in today's second reading:

Do not conform yourselves to this age
but be transformed by the renewal of your mind,
that you may discern what is the will of God,
what is good and pleasing and perfect.

In other words, we must view the world not from the *world's* perspective but from *God's*. Our Gospel reading echoes this point. Christ himself chastises Saint Peter for "thinking not as God does, but as human beings do." When dealing with moral issues – with issues of right and wrong – our first objective *must* be to learn to think as God does.

Thinking in a certain way, of course, would be completely useless unless it is accompanied by *doing*. Doing requires courage. We also heard

today from the Prophet Jeremiah, perhaps the figure from the Old Testament who was most reviled during his own lifetime:

All the day I am an object of laughter;
everyone mocks me ...
the word of the LORD has brought me
derision and reproach all the day.

Pointing out what is evil in the world will *not* lead to the world liking us. Any prophet of the Lord, in any nation or any age, must be prepared to live on a steady diet of “derision and reproach.”

These concepts sound good in theory, but how do we live them out in practice? How do we learn to view the world through God’s eyes? How do we develop the strength to disregard the disdain of our peers? There is no simple answer to that question, but there is at least one good starting point – one that is accessible to all of us. It really has nothing to do with our relationship with *other* people, but with our perception of *ourselves*. That starting point is *humility*.

To the extent that the secular world thinks about humility at all, it probably envisions a person who is obsessed with his own inferiority. In fact, that is almost the exact *opposite* of humility. As C. S. Lewis put it:

Do not imagine that if you meet a really humble man he will be what most people call “humble” nowadays: he will not be a sort of greasy, smarmy person, who is always telling you that, of course, he is nobody. ... He will not be thinking about humility: he will not be thinking about himself at all.

To quote another Protestant author, “Humility is not thinking less of yourself; it is thinking of yourself less.”

From the world’s perspective, humility might seem like a terrible burden. Why can we never take credit for anything we have done? On the contrary, it is a tremendous liberation. To quote Saint Teresa of Calcutta, who had some expertise in this area:

If you are humble nothing will touch you, neither praise nor disgrace, because you know what you are. If you are blamed you will not be discouraged. If they call you a saint you will not put yourself on a pedestal.

By thinking of ourselves less – by recognizing who and what we really are – we set aside our own limitations and open ourselves up to God’s immeasurable blessings:

For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it,
but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

This is not any easy path, and not one we can undertake on our own. Nevertheless, fortified by the sacraments of the Church and the prayers of the saints, we can make progress every day – until at last we see the world, ourselves, and Jesus Christ as they truly are.