

THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Today's Gospel, from chapter four of St. Matthew, declares that the Lord Jesus Christ, in the early stages of His earthly ministry, went through his home region of Galilee teaching in the synagogues, proclaiming the Gospel of God's Kingdom, and curing the diseases and illnesses of the people. In this He was fulfilling what we heard in the first reading, a Lesson from chapter eight of Isaiah: in what was called Galilee of the Gentiles, a great light has dawned.

This Light, the Dawn from on High of which the Church sings every morning during the "Benedictus", the Canticle of Zachariah from chapter one of St. Luke, shows us many things. Among other things, this Light, shining in the darkness and undaunted by it, shows us that, as Archbishop Sheen used to say, "Life is worth Living" If I were to sum up the Gospel of the Kingdom in one sentence, it would be this: "Life is worth living: mine, yours, the lives of the wealthy and powerful, and the lives of the poor and weak" This, as Pope John Paul II said, is "Evangelium Vitae - the Gospel of Life"

In recent decades, Popes have gotten in the habit of writing a great deal, more than people can reasonably be expected to read. That, sometimes, "less is more" is something that future popes might consider. We who are closer to ground level can only hope that someone will help guide us toward the papal classics, papal writings that have enduring value, and that can be read with profit decades after they were written. Of the papal classics, one is certainly Pope John Paul II's "Evangelium Vitae", from the 1990s. In the "The Gospel of Life" Pope John Paul reflected and taught on the intrinsic value of each and every human life, and on the need to defend each and every human life, from conception to natural death. Life is worth living, he said, and not just mine and yours. THEIR lives are worth living, the lives of the criminals, the lives of the noncompliant, the lives of the uncooperative, and the lives of the unwanted.

The 20th Century saw terrible wars and man made disasters, in which human life was treated as dirt cheap. Foolishly, sloppy media commentators often describe scenes of misery and devastation as "Medieval". It would be wiser to respond to a scene of human suffering and degradation by exclaiming "It looks 20th Century here!" Still, the ghastly 20th Century, the age of World Wars and Death Camps, managed to end well, by a sequence of miracles, really. Instead of humbly thanking God for the Horrible Century's good ending, people proclaimed that history itself had ended on a good note, that the putative good guys had won, once and for all, and that humanity had arrived at the paradise on earth of democracy and free market liberalism.

Some noticed that this specious paradise had a disturbingly casual attitude toward the sanctity of human life, and was therefore likely to self destruct pretty quickly. It is good, sometimes, in one's late 50s to reread favorite books from one's early 30s. One of my favorites from that time was MILLENNIUM - A HISTORY OF THE PAST THOUSAND YEARS, by Felipe Fernandez Armesto. Now, you're hardly here for a book review, but during my recent rereading I was struck by his epilogue. Good historians know that History does not repeat itself, but does have rhythms and patterns. From the consistent rhythms and patterns of human behavior, it is possible to offer some broad forecasts. Fernandez-Armesto's moral forecast for the 21st

Century was grim. Almost a quarter century into it, I was struck by how accurate his forecast was, with one big, unexpected, sign of hope going against the trends.

1. Western liberalism will undermine its own principles by banning moral absolutes as politically incorrect. He was certainly right on that point. Two generations have been raised to believe that there are no moral absolutes. This, of course, means that, under pressure, they are easily capable of any atrocity. Tomorrow's historians will be "looking back from a violent future"
2. The new age of massacres will begin with the unborn, the sick, and the elderly, because morally sloppy blather about the "right to die" will inevitably become a license to kill. This has already begun to happen, as cases of "assisted suicide" multiply in some places, with many of those "assisted suicides" turning out, on close examination, to be recommended and highly encouraged suicides. The new age has let murder in by the back door.
3. Even the Catholic Church's "unique commitment to moral absolutism in the defense of human dignity, individual freedom, social justice, and the sanctity of life" will be compromised, "not when the present pontiff dies, because the long life in office of John Paul II has strengthened the moral fiber of the cardinalate, but in the next pontificate after that". There is too much pessimism here, perhaps; but I cannot fail to notice how many prominent Catholics, lay and otherwise, have chosen to desert the pro-life cause, in some instances actually going over to the enemy.

And yet. . . and yet. . . .

Against those trends, predictable to one accustomed, by studying, to notice the patterns of human behavior, there stands one thing that was not predicted. Roe vs. Wade fell. The United States of America ceased to proclaim that an unlimited right to kill the unborn, for any reason whatsoever, and even for no reason at all, was "The Law of the Land". Intelligent observers, such as my late father, thought that this would never happen. Sadly, he told me, all of the political, social, and cultural trends are against such a thing. He wasn't wrong. The political, social, and cultural trends were against Roe falling. And yet it fell. Like the horrid 20th Century ending without World War III, the fall of Roe was against the normal patterns of human history. When such things happen, one wonders if Someone other than mere human beings has been at work. "By the Lord has this been done; it is wonderful in our eyes"

It is crucial to recognize how truly wicked Roe vs Wade was. It went far beyond trying to respond with compassion, albeit mistaken compassion, to difficult, sometimes terrifyingly difficult, circumstances. It affirmed that there was an absolute right to kill the unborn in any and all circumstances, simply because that was someone's "choice". Any reason was reason enough to do it - the license to kill could hardly have been broader. Indeed, no reason at all need be given. To kill was a right. I remember my late mother being furiously angry at having to call such an evil notion "The Law of the Land". She was right to be angry. By making it "The Law of the Land", a few people had entangled a great nation in their great guilt.

There remains much to do, more social than political, and more moral than social, though neither the social nor the political should be ignored. There remains much to do. Yet it is wonderful that we no longer have to call a license to kill “The Law of the Land” The Law of our Land, and the Law of every land, should be much more about making life worth living than about giving some a license to kill (let alone to kill at will!). The day Roe fell was a great day. It fell against the odds. It fell, ultimately, because God helped us do something about it.

God helps us still. There remains much to do. Human life was dirt cheap during much of the 20th Century, the age, I remind you again, of World Wars and Death Camps (from Stalin through Hitler to Mao and Pol Pot). Must human life be dirt cheap in the 21st as well? The normal patterns of human history suggest that it will. The normal patterns of human history suggest that there will be many people who are criminal, uncooperative, and unwanted, and that death will be the cheapest way of dealing with them. Yet against the normal pattern of human history stands the wonder of America actually dropping Roe. Such is the power of human free will, that the normal pattern is not inevitable, even in human terms. When human free will actively cooperates with the Grace of God, the normal pattern may even be reversed (as it was when the 20th Century ended without World War III).

We do have a huge task in front of us. It includes, but goes far beyond, being “Pro-life” in the narrow sense of opposing abortion on demand. The task is nothing less than “Moral absolutism in the defence of human dignity, individual freedom, social justice, and the sanctity of life” I read that sentence from Fernandez-Armesto nearly as a mission statement for the Church’s public life. Human dignity, individual freedom, social justice, and the sanctity of life. These four things go together. Because every human life is willed by God and loved by Him, every human life has a dignity no human circumstance or will can erase. Having inherent dignity, even human being has an essential freedom that must be protected, a viable and contributing position in society that must be found, and a holiness that must be defended, from conception to natural death. For the glory of God and the good of human beings, we Catholics must resolve at this Mass to be untiring and uncompromising in our defense of human dignity, individual freedom, social justice, and the sanctity of life.

There is a Gospel the world needs to hear, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, of course, which is nothing other than the Gospel of Life. Life is God’s gift; and, by God’s Grace, and our cooperation with that Grace, it can be made worth living for all. For the unborn and for the elderly, life is worth living. For the criminal and the noncompliant, life is worth living. For the unwanted, life is worth living. For those of us who don’t fit into any of those categories, for us too, life is worth living. Moral absolutists in defense of human dignity, individual freedom, social justice, and the sanctity of life, let us, God helping, make this proclamation to the world: Life is Worth Living!