

The Nazareth Page
A gospel meditation for the home
October 1st, 2017 – 26th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Matthew 21:28-32

We start with a Catholic quiz about the saints. First question: After Jesus, Mary and Joseph, who is the most popular Catholic saint? (Answer: St. Francis of Assisi) Next question: What are the most famous words said by St. Francis? (Answer: "Preach the Gospel at all times and only when necessary, use words.") Third question: Where did Jesus express this same idea? (Answer: In today's gospel!)

If you were not able to answer all these questions correctly, don't worry. Most can't. Including the writer of this mediation until I read today's gospel and thought about it as connected with Pope Francis.

One of the things that is said about our pope is that "his actions speak louder than his words." Think of his early days as pope. People noticed that he was a "no frills" pope. He personally paid his bill where he stayed during the conclave that elected him. He said he wanted a simple room in the guest house that was used for papal visitors, instead of rooms in the papal palace. He drives around in a small Fiat. On Holy Thursday in his first year as pope, he washed the feet of inmates at a Roman jail, one of whom was a young Muslim woman. All his actions were rooted in gospel virtue.

In today's gospel, we are asked by Jesus to judge what's more important, words or deeds. He answers using a family example. One son said he would not do what his father wanted, but changed his mind and did it. The other said he would do what the father asked, but in the end, didn't do it. Jesus sided with the first son.

Of course, our good words are important. But they can be deceptive unless they connect with good actions. Ads pushing various products and politicians wanting our vote overwhelm us with words and more words. We can grow sceptical of a "good words" approach that is not followed by good deeds.

So that's the emphasis here. God is more interested in what we do than in what we merely say. There is work to be done. People to be helped. Bridges to be built between warring factions. So many good actions are needed. So, let's get to work!

David M. Thomas, PhD

The Nazareth Page
A gospel meditation for the home
October 8th, 2017 – 27th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Matthew 21:33-43

Today's gospel is R-rated for violence. Lots of killing in this parable of Jesus. It's hard to give an exact number of how many die in it. Clearly, quite a few. In fact, at the end, even the owner of the vineyard gets the last word by killing his tenants, who had killed his son. So, what's the point? Here's what I think.

Jesus initiated the beginning of God's Kingdom on earth. And he was quite serious about making this central to his message. And God will do all that God can do to make it successful. God will never cease working on this "project", no matter what. Even if opposition arises, in the end, God will remain faithful. God doesn't quit.

Do we exhibit similar effort in our lives? Are we ever tempted to quit something we once began? I know I have. I can point to quite a few articles and books that I have started to write, but never finished. I have many household projects half-done. I only rarely take care of all the tasks on my daily, monthly or yearly to-do list. Much less what's on my bucket list! Of course, I rationalize with the excuse that no one ever accomplishes everything they set out to do. Well, anyone except God.

Two weeks ago, we heard the words that God's thoughts are not our own. This week we can add, that the same can be said about how God acts. God is different from us. God finishes what God begins. Which means that we can trust God, no matter what. Which also applies to God's help. We know that things don't always turn out as we had planned. We have disappointments and failures. And God knows that. But God does not give up on us, on any of us!

Back to the parable. The real owner of the vineyard is God. And God wants the vineyard to be productive, which does not mean more grapes, but rather, more workers (that's us!) to help make God's Kingdom become real right now. More acts of helping each other. More caring for the sick and the needy. More care for the vineyard which includes the land God has given to us, our home here, the Earth!

Pray for the desire and the strength not to quit the work we have been created to accomplish. While we may quit this or that from time to time, we can always start again. Let's never give up on ourselves or those close to us. God never will.

David M. Thomas, PhD

The Nazareth Page
A gospel meditation for the home
October 15th, 2017 – 28th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Matthew 22:1-14

We are being treated to a series of parables about God's Kingdom during the last few weeks. To say that they are far from clear is an understatement. They are gripping stories (lots of action and sometimes even killing) and oftentimes difficult to understand.

Today we're told of a king who arranged a wedding feast for his son. Invitations went out and you would think that all those invited would surely come. The food and drink would be abundant, there would be wonderful music and dance, and all the important people would be there. This would be one wedding no one would want to miss. Except that's not how it went.

It seems that *all those invited* decided not to attend, sometimes with quite lame excuses. The king sent out a second invitation generating a similar response: no one was interested. It turned out to be a very bad idea to turn down the king's invitation because the angry king sent out his tough guys and killed all those who decided to ignore the king's wedding invitation. (They should have gone. They *might* have had a good time. It would certainly be better than what eventually came down.)

So, the guest list was revised. In fact, it was left wide open because the king then invited *anyone* his servants found on the street. This tactic insured that the feast would not be filled by society's best, but by vagabonds, stragglers, ner-do-wells, drifters and all sorts of questionable types. You can bet that *they were going to have a good time!*

Parables are to be taken seriously, but not literally. That's because they are often multi-layered and symbolic of complicated matters. So, what are we to take from this one? Here's my thought.

God is generous in a crazy sort of way. God invites and chooses everyone (we know that from other parts of the gospels) and God will choose people we might not. Think of the way most people *carefully* put together guest lists for weddings, birthdays, anniversaries and the like. Great care is taken to limit guests to those you decide should come. No others. By nature, it seems we are narrow in our choice of guests. God isn't! That's the message here.

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The Nazareth Page
A gospel meditation for the home
October 22, 2017 – 29th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Matthew 22:15-21

Is there any connection between politics and religion? This is a major topic of debate in most countries. Fifty years ago, social philosophers noted a general decrease in religious activity and observance and predicted that as the years passed, the connection between religion and politics would disappear. They were wrong. The rise of radical religious fervour around the world is evident.

In the time of Jesus, Rome ruled his part of the world and levied heavy taxes on the people. When Jesus was asked about a possible conflict in obligations to the state (Rome) and to God, he was being led into a kind of trap. If he said, pay taxes only to Rome, he would lose his religious reputation. If he said the opposite, he could be accused of treason.

This gospel records a scene in the gospels where Biblical commentators mention the brilliance of Jesus. He came up with the perfect answer. Pay to Caesar what is his (which was a tax) and to God, what was due God. This basically meant everything else. It was the kind of response that quieted his questioners.

But we should seriously think about his words. If we reflect on what we owe God, and we are honest and open-eyed, we would have to conclude that we owe to our loving God everything (well, most everything). We owe God by the very fact that we are here, existing right now, alive to all the joys and possibilities offered to us each day, where we can help to make life better for all. And don't overlook that we are also promised eternal happiness with God. We all can put together a long list of the "blessings" we have been given, past, present and future. Try it!

Now what does God ask in return? Here's something to think about. Nothing and everything! Before you think I am off-my-rocker (whatever that means), let me explain. Our faith proclaims that God is eternal, totally independent of the vast creation that God has made and needs *nothing* from us to be happy. Mostly, God wants our love for sure, and wants us to help those who live among us who are in need. But we do not ever have to include on our list of needy ones, the name of God. And if we love others with the kind of love God has for them, then we will give to God what God desires.

David M. Thomas, PhD

The Nazareth Page
A gospel meditation for the home
October 29, 2017 – 30th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Matthew 22:34-40

Today we hear one of the shortest gospels of the year. But don't be fooled by its brevity. Its message is very large. And extremely important.

It seems that Jesus attracted people with questions. Or more precisely, with disputed questions. Maybe they were hoping for an argument. People do that sort of thing, even today. Their question had to do with right and wrong, with commands and laws. In the Jewish religion during the lifetime of Jesus, there were hundreds of laws. There were laws about table manners, when one could and could not work, dietary laws and so forth. They might have wondered if Jesus favoured a "law and order" approach. Was he strict or lenient? Where did he stand on the many laws that were found in Jewish scriptures?

It seems that it didn't take Jesus long to respond to their inquiry. He quoted two commands that were found in their holy books. First, we were to love *God* with *all* our heart, with *all* our soul and with *all* our mind. And the second command was like the first, we were to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. That's it. Just two.

Some might have thought that if there were only two commandments, it would be easy to follow them. But those who understand *the full implications* of those two commands knew that following *those two* would be extremely difficult. After all, fully loving *God* and loving our neighbour (whoever might be our neighbour at a given moment) as much as we love ourselves, well, that was very demanding.

Fast forward to today. Most would agree that really *loving* another is no easy accomplishment. Especially when "the neighbor" includes whoever is next to us - where we live, where we work, where we shop, where we drive, where we worship, wherever we are. Maybe you have heard it said that it is easy to love everyone, if you exclude individual persons. But that's the point Jesus is making. You can't exclude the person next to you because that person (or group) is your "neighbor."

Obviously, this has a marriage and family dimension in it because those relationships are often "our closet neighbour." I wonder if those who questioned Jesus about commands felt satisfied or troubled by his answer. How would you feel?

David M. Thomas, PhD