



(Jubilee Parish Mass Celebration
– 11 a.m. 50 yrs a priest)
12th Sunday (A) June 22, 2008
Jeremiah 20:10-13 Romans 5:12-15
Matthew 10:26-33

Fr. Vince Alagia, SJ

HIS EYE IS ON THE SPARROW

“..if God’s eye is on the sparrow, I know he watches over me.” With this phrase wringing in her ears, a woman named Civilla Martin penned the famous hymn, *His Eye Is On The Sparrow*, a cherished part of Gospel music. It came about from a meeting she and her husband had with a crippled woman named Mrs. Doolittle. They were vacationing in upper New York State in 1905. Remember, those were the days when there were no ramps, and so forth, for people who had difficulty managing steps and curbs or were in wheel chairs. Instead of being bitter and pessimistic, Mrs. Doolittle was upbeat, cheerful and her secret was simply this, ***“...if God’s eye is on the sparrow, I know he watches over me.”***

I wonder if in her hours of musing about her life, these words came from a sense of the Lord’s directive to his apostles as they set out on their anything but easy mission in his name. He gave them counsel on how to offer and receive kindness, generosity, hospitality, how and what to preach, and how to announce healing from evil spirits and physical suffering. The disciples must have been eager and wide-eyed to begin their first assignment and to be trusted by Jesus with such a noble and important work.

Jesus, however, was no smooth-talking salesman, spinning a cheerful tale of glory and success for his followers. Theirs would be a journey filled with successes and failures, joys and suffering, not only emotionally but also physically at the hands of others. Their faith in him and what he stood for would be tested severely. What he tried to tell them was to be alert to what they were about and why, so that they stand in the face of it all without crumbling, and, above all, without doubting themselves and their Lord.

We might have wished Jesus had offered all of us a simple and safe path through life, protected from all danger and illness through suffering, but that is not what he does, because that isn’t the way life is for any of us. Even he died on a cross at the hands of people who misunderstood

and opposed him. So, as followers, we need not expect our paths will be magically protected from all harm because we are followers of Christ.

The truth is that we need to anticipate and prepare ourselves for those things that are hard for us to take, suffering, rejection, like it or not. This doesn't mean that when things are going well for us, that we wait "for the other shoe to drop," as the expression goes. No way! It is just that our lives are like a wheel, sometimes going well for us, sometimes lousy. When they are going well, we need to realize that things will become lousy again at some point, and prepare ourselves for that, and when they are lousy, we need to remember when things went well and were good and that the good times will come again. To me what empowers us to understand and deal with both is our faith in the Lord; faith is the spoke of the wheel of life.

We have to be prepared. For a moment now, consider this, something of our early American history. The British pitched an idyllic life in the New World, as America was known as then. In order to enlist and recruit willing settlers for the expedition, the leaders of the Jamestown settlement described what it would be like in the New World as a Promised Land flowing with milk and honey with little work required, hospitable natives, and temperate climates year-round. What the settlers found was a bountiful and promising land, to be sure, but it required extensive labor, the natives were not always friendly, and the summers plagued by mosquitoes and the winters were killers. Most of the original settlers died of disease and hunger that first winter. They were woefully unprepared for the realities of living in the New World.

By contrast there was a British explorer in the early twentieth century, Ernest Shackleton, who attempts the first cross-continent mission to Antarctica in 1914. He advertised for his crews with this particularly scary invitation: "Men wanted for hazardous journey. Small wages, bitter cold, long months of complete darkness, constant danger, safe return doubtful." Only a few volunteered for the mission. Incredibly not a single member of that expedition was lost because they were so well prepared for the difficult conditions they would face.

Jesus' directive to his eager disciples was in this latter fashion: a mission fraught with danger and rejection, but it was the mission of a lifetime. I can't speak of what was the spiritual dimension of Shackleton's mind or any of his crew. How much was God a part of any of those men? One thing with the follower of Christ is that he promises to be with us, and cares for us as he cares for one of the smallest of creatures, the sparrow.

Any successes we have are not dependent upon an easy path, or on our championship prowess and skill. Any success we have is from hard work in the Lord's company; and even in failure he is still with us. In the end, the success of Christ's mission through all of us rests upon the willingness of imperfect, sinful souls like us, who trust in a perfect and sufficient God, a God who knows and love us so much that He has counted every hair on our heads, like a mother/father pouring loving attention over a newborn, memorizing every square of the baby's body, every wrinkle, every mole. That is how God cares for us, except infinitely more. *For his eye is on the sparrow, and I know he watches me.*

THE IMAGE OF THE SPARROW IS A POWERFUL ONE FOR ME TODAY AND AT THIS POINT IN MY PRIESTHOOD OF 50 YEARS, MY JESUIT LIFE OF 60 PLUS YEARS, MY LIFE OF 81 YEARS. WITH TIME AND A LITTLE BIT OF LIVING, THE EAGLE IN ME AIN'T WHAT HE USED TO BE. IT IS WONDERFUL, HOWEVER, TO KNOW THAT THE LORD HAS THIS SPARROW IN THE PALM OF HIS HAND, NO LESS PRECIOUS TO HIM AFTER ALL THIS TIME. IT IS WONDERFUL FOR THIS SPARROW TO FLY AROUND THIS CHURCH AND TO LAND OF YOUR SHOULDERS, TO SHARE WITH YOU WHAT HE HAS GIVEN ME – FOR YOU

In conclusion, I invited you to pray with me in your hearts this sentiment of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, SJ:

I've come to think that the only supreme prayer
we can offer up during these hours
when the road before us is shrouded in darkness,
is that of our Master on the cross:

In manus tuas commendo spiritum meum.

To the hands that broke and gave life to the bread,
that blessed and caressed, that we pierced;...
to the kindly and mighty hands that reach down
to the very marrow of the soul – that mould and create –
to the hands through which so great a love is transmitted -
it is to these that it is good to surrender our soul,
above all when we suffer or are afraid.*

* Hearts on Fire. Ed. Michael Harter, SJ. Institute of Jesuit Sources p72