

260b, 2015

Next Thursday, the Church will celebrate the feast of Saint St. Therese of the Child Jesus, also known as the Little Flower. She died of t.b. at the age of 24, having suffered greatly. It is interesting that her 4 siblings also joined the Carmelite convent, with the last one dying as recently as 1959. And because one of her sisters was allowed to pursue photography as a hobby, we have 44 pictures of St. Therese.

Along with Joan of Arc, she is co-patroness of France; in fact, most French pilots during WWI carried a picture of her with them, asking for her protection from harm. I can't remember when, but 20 + years ago her relics came to the U.S. and millions lined up in order to view them.

A nun who asked for her patronage was Mother Theresa and we all know quite a lot about this Nobel Prize winner because of her compassion for the sick and dying in India and around the world. I recently came across a little known story @ Mother Theresa. "One day, she went to a grocer & asked for outdated food that couldn't be sold. At that request, the grocer spit in her face.

Mother Theresa said: Thank you, sir; that was for me. Now, may I have something to feed the poor?"

Following Jesus sometimes requires us to behave in drastically different ways from how we might act if we were not his disciples.

In today's gospel reading, Jesus calls us to be radically different, radically loving and radically forgiving.

He does this by using dramatic language and memorable metaphors.

For example, Jesus reminds us of the need for compassion—that is “putting another’s pain into our own heart”—when he assures us that even giving water to someone in need will not go unrewarded.

We’ve heard that “cup of water” illustration before, so perhaps we don’t sense how powerful an image it was, but when Jesus first used it, it had a dramatic effect!

At that time, people thought that the only way to please God was through some significant act that would result in praise and admiration from others— as when the wealthy would drop many, loud coins into the donation jars at the Temple so as to be noticed by the people around them.

But then, Jesus talks about a different kind of “reward” for those who cause others to sin.

He says: If any of you puts a stumbling-block before one of these little ones who believes in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone was hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea.

If you’ve never seen a millstone, you might not realize what a powerful image this remark planted into the minds of those who first heard it.

It might help us to understand the enormity of a millstone by visiting the Kennecott mine and examining one of their giant tires; then imagine one of them to be made of cement and tied around your neck as you were tossed into the sea. Now that is an image that would certainly catch our attention.

The word “scandal” originally meant a stumbling block that was put into someone’s way that caused him to trip and fall. This raises a troubling question that each of us needs to address: am I a

stumbling block to those who might be in search of Jesus or the Church? For instance, would those interested in faith want to be a Christian because they know me? What kind of impression of Christian life or of the Church do I present to others?

Have we not heard people say: I would not want to be a Christian because they are just like everyone else I know: they gossip, they tell lies, they cheat, they are greedy for money, they take revenge.

Furthermore, non-Christians often have strange ideas about God, about Jesus, about Mary and about the Church, but where did they get those ideas? What kind of picture of Jesus and the Church do we present as neighbors, as parents, as teachers, as employers or as employees?

But now let's return to today's gospel that shows us that Jesus is deadly serious about sin.

Jesus uses strong words and memorable metaphors in order to remind us of the danger of forgetting about, or ignoring the reality of, sin.

He refers to "Gehenna, rendered as "hell" in some Bible translations; it is a place no one would want to go.

In Jesus' day, Gehenna was Jerusalem's city dump, where there was almost always a smoldering fire and an unbearable stench. It is for these reasons that Gehenna raised images of revulsion in the minds of Jesus' original audience

He used such language not to frighten us, but to urge us to cooperate with his grace; after all, Jesus only speaks of hell 11 times, but mentions heaven a 123 times, as a place He wants us to go.

Jesus came to save us by not allowing us to be lost.

God does not want to force his love on us and he does not want to force us to love Him.

Martin Luther wrote in his commentary on the Sermon on the Mount: Christ does not want to drag anyone by the hair to himself.

Indeed God created us with free will that allows us to reject him, allows us to refuse his love for us and allows us to turn down his invitation for us to be with him forever in heaven.

Who really knows what hell means? Perhaps, as some suggest, that hell is simply going out of existence. Then again, what about Hitler and Stalin and all the other ruthless people who killed and tortured so many? Should there not be some sort of reckoning for them? But now for the sake of argument, let's assume the more traditional view that hell is real and ongoing and that if such a hell did not exist, then hate-filled people would be forced to be with a loving God forever.

Actually, love can only exist when it is freely chosen.

Moving on, Jesus tells us that hell is to be so avoided that if one's foot or one's eye causes us to sin, it would be better for that part of the body to be cut off from us than for it to be the cause of inheriting an unquenchable fire.

Jesus is not advocating self-mutilation; rather, he is calling for self-mastery.

And yet at the same time, he paints a vivid picture of what we would face if we rejected his grace.

Powerful, memorable, graphic words and images—ones not easily dismissed or forgotten.

After all, the Christian road is not an easy road.

The values and ethics of Jesus are really absurd according to worldly wisdom—remember the earlier example of how the grocer treated Mother Theresa and her reaction to him?

In fact, for those who do not believe in the way that Christians are called to love and forgive—well then, such a way of life makes no sense at all.

But God's wisdom is not of this world. Anyone can perpetuate violence & darkness; but we are called to offer a more hopeful alternative to violence & darkness by living a life that promotes Christian values.

Actually the love that Jesus is proposing is, by all human standards, absurd—and so it is appropriate here to recall St. Paul when he says: we are to become “fools for Christ.” After all, statements like turning the other cheek when hit doesn't make sense to a lot of people, even good & loving people.

But when we choose to love Jesus, not just by harboring a warm-fuzzy feeling towards him, but by serving him—by obeying his call to serve others in radical ways, ways that some might consider ridiculous—then we are privileged to join in the only life that is truly worth living.

And as a Christian, through my baptism, I have been called, and it is my vocation, to be for others, “another Christ.”

We may get some indication of where we stand if we listen carefully to the scathing words of James in the Second Reading. What are our attitudes to wealth and poverty? To luxury side by side with

indulgence? What is our opinion to the glaring inequalities between the radically different standards of living in various countries?

Pope Francis continuously brought this concern up to both the U.S. Congress and the United Nations.

I am called not only to be for myself a good person. I am called to reach out, to love, to be just, and to be truly brothers or sisters to those in need.

I am also called to be prophet, to proclaim in words and actions that the Source of all love, mercy and justice is a God who loves, who forgives and who wants all to share in a life that enriches us, and our world, on every level.