

11-12 July 2020

15th Sun in OT (A)

Isaiah 55:10-11; Romans 8:18-23; Matthew 13:1-23

I consider that the sufferings of the present time are as nothing compared with the glory to be revealed for us.

Church history was one of my favorite classes in seminary. Not only did we have a great teacher who knew the material like the back of his hand, but for me, it was a nice contrast with the more open-ended questions of philosophy and theology. History tends to be about who, what, when, where, and why. I like to make the logical connections between things, to “plot the points”, so to speak, taking into account background and context. And in the class, we didn’t shy away from the dark events and periods of our Church’s history, but we did take time to establish context for them.

Of course, history can also be **complicated**. Unless we have access to people’s inner motivations, for example, through their own writings or statements, we can only know so much about why they did what they did, or didn’t do what they didn’t do. Thus, there can be different interpretations or different revisions of history.

History can give us perspective, of where we have come from. Faith leads us to eternal life, a relationship with God. History can illuminate and give context to our faith, and faith can complete our history. Faith can remind us that the past is not all there is; it can expand our horizons to the hope that sustains us going forward.

And thus we celebrate our diocese's bicentennial this weekend. I won't go into a lot of historical detail here, as I wrote about it in my bulletin column for this week (and also to encourage you to purchase the diocesan bicentennial book if you haven't already), but suffice it to say that the beginnings of our diocese were inauspicious, not very grand, but a very interesting microcosm of the beginnings of the Catholic Church in the United States.

History is, I think, ultimately about people, how people shaped events or how events shaped them. People with flaws and mixed motivations, people who exemplified heroic virtue, and people who indulged in scandalous behavior. Leaders with great vision, and ordinary people who lived their faith in the face of great adversity.

Even with the challenges that people in the history of our diocese have faced, we can see God's providence at work, through our faith. And we know that we are in very historic times ourselves, right now.

This is a similar perspective that Saint Paul has in his letter to the Romans, in his look at salvation history. He looks back to the Fall of humanity, to when sin entered the world, and he describes all of creation suffering in labor pains because of it. Even though Jesus Christ has won for us that freedom from slavery to corruption, that "glorious freedom of the children of God", Paul acknowledges that we have yet to experience that completely, fully. But because of what Jesus has done for us, we have been given the firstfruits of the Spirit, a foretaste of that eternal freedom from sin with God.

This is another example of the already-but-not-yet dynamic of the kingdom of God. Jesus has already come and inaugurated the reign of God, setting us free from sin and death, but the full realization, the full manifestation of that kingdom will only come at the end of time, the end of history as we know it, when Jesus returns.

In the meantime, our Christian hope drives us forward, to let the word of God be living and effective in our lives today.

The prophet Isaiah presents us with the image of God's word as a dynamic force, a divine energy, that goes forth from the mouth of God and carries out his will in creation. In other words, God's word not only expresses, it manifests, it makes present, his providence, his reign over the world and all his creatures.

In Jesus's parable of the sower in the gospel, note that God sows the seed of his word freely, generously, not just on those who are already receptive to it. Of course, the moral of the parable is that we should be receptive to the seed of his word and thus bear fruit as disciples. But in light of our reflection on divine providence at work in our history, perhaps we can focus on how prodigious God is in his sowing of his word. Any farmer who knows what he's doing would focus on only sowing seed in soil that has a reasonable chance of growing. Otherwise, he'd be wasting his time and his energy.

Not so with God. Because God's thoughts and ways are so far above our thoughts and ways, there is no such thing as wasting his time, his energy, his grace upon his creation. He knows what he is about, and thus we can trust that if we but persevere in faith, hope, and love, he will accomplish his will.

History brings us perspective, and faith brings us eternal life. If the trials and sufferings of the past and present are nothing compared to the eternal life with God to be revealed for us, both in the future and in the present through our relationship with him, may we strive forward in hope.