

Atonement and Healing Prayer Service – Bishop Berg’s Homily – August 27, 2019

We cannot approach our God through the lens of power. We must approach Him as humble creatures seeking His love and attention. As Bishop I place the crosier, miter, ring and pectoral cross before the altar to acknowledge my and our powerlessness to approach our Lord or to accomplish anything without him.

--In this prayer service we are not only saying that we are sorry for our sins. We are also committing ourselves to the correction and renewal of our Church, the Body of Christ, and entrusting ourselves to the only source that can accomplish healing, which is the love of God.

We stand at the foot of the Cross and contemplate the wounds of Christ. We must begin by acknowledging our sins, our failed responsibilities, and turn to the power of the cross, of the sacrificed Jesus, to save us. As a church we shamefully and remorsefully acknowledge that there were clergy and others among us that abused our children, the most vulnerable, entrusted to our care. There was also a horrendous and criminal silence in our leadership, certain Bishops, shepherds of the faithful, a silent dismissal of the cries of those whose innocence was sacrificed, who were wounded in body, mind and spirit. There was ignorance on the part of many in the lack of understanding and gravity of this sin and the damage which it caused.

And today we suffer for those sins and crimes, for the mistrust we share in our leadership and for the shame and remorse for what we have done and what we have failed to do.

In this first reading we hear proclaimed from the Book of Lamentations, we see in the history of Israel a tragedy. Jerusalem has fallen, the temple has been destroyed and the nation decimated and scattered. Humiliation and shame are universal. The author of this Lamentation was there and he saw it happen. He has seen, and heard, and composed this lament, which fully admits the need for confession of sin, grief over the suffering which is the effect of this sin, the sin is the turning away from God, in his pride. Now is the time to go to one’s knees, and return to God in fidelity and his power to restore. “I have called upon your name, O LORD, from the bottom of the pit; you heard me call, “Do not let your ear be deaf to my cry for help. You drew near on the day I called you; you said, “Do not fear!”

We must know first that the cry of Lamentations is the cry of the victims, of those hurt and left to suffer, those wounded by our Church. It is the cry that our Church be purified and the cancer of abuse be excised. It is the cry that our ecclesial Leadership be purified in a transparent way, that all clergy, accept the accountability that comes from being called to this wonderful and unique vocation that we have to take care of God’s children. It is our cry that the evil sin of pride be defeated in our church, and that our plea for restoration be made at the foot of the cross and that it be constant and permanent.

This evening, our Gospel reading in Saint Matthew’s account of the Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon on the Mount is the very heart of Christ’s moral teaching and his spiritual leadership. The Beatitudes which we heard tonight are the most distinguishing and important aspect of what it means to follow Jesus, what it means to have an authentic Christian life. We bring this Gospel into the center of our reflection now.

The mission of our Church is to follow and to teach, Jesus says the Good Shepherd taught. He begins his teaching with the first Beatitude, Blessed are the Poor in Spirit. Christ, who elsewhere says in the Gospel as the Good Shepherd, "Learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart." He begins his Sermon by identifying poverty of spirit as the entrance for the goal of heaven, and the rest of the beatitudes build on this one. Poverty of spirit is most important and shows that learning this teaching, this one teaching, is more than just trying to remember each one beatitude as a separate rule to follow. The teaching involves a conversion of heart and a changing of character from what we are to what we must become. To follow Jesus we cannot be part of the way it used to be and where we can hide and avoid difficult decisions. To follow Jesus we must become who we really are and that is how God made us, to be with those who mourn, especially those sinned against, in meekness, hunger for justice, and mercy. Only then will be blessed with purity of heart, only then will we see God.

The Poverty of Spirit revealed by Christ involved His emptying of himself in humility and obedience, and in faithfulness to the Father's children. Jesus was sent and given to us for the reconciliation of the world, and that reconciliation is for us. The only worthy vocation of those who, in meekness and poverty of spirit, follow the example of Jesus in hearing and following the will of the Father and this is the poverty of spirit and meekness which calls us now with humility and the courage of vulnerability, and the grace to face our fears, and not to back away from them now in denial. In this time we look to healing and reconciliation we work for the purification of our church and for our mission. The enemy challenges us to despair, to turn away and yet we know that the power of God is always with us. The power of prayer, we see our sisters here Our Poor Clares, our Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament who have been a bedrock of prayer for us for so many years in working silently within our diocese, this is the silent and hidden power of goodness, and to all the good priests and the sisters and clergy that have been working with us for so many years. The faithful in the parishes and our priests have worked so assiduously to make our environment safe, and so it is. St. Therese of the Child Jesus is with us, leading the children to Christ. Our Lady of Guadalupe stretches her arms to encompass all of us, and gather us in as God's children. We do not lose sight of the source and summit of our strength, of our faith. Jesus Christ, he is present with us now, in the Eucharist and in our daily lives.

In a prayer for atonement and healing we know, we accept, and we move forward:

The mission of the teaching of Jesus today is the transformation of the mission of the Catholic Church, in order to reconcile all the earth and all the children to the Father, and therefore one day to inherit the kingdom of God which is available for us and beckons and invites us forward into eternity.