

Prayer and Practice

What is Paul trying to tell us?

On coming into the world Jesus said,
“Sacrifice and offering you did not desire,
but a body you have prepared for me.
Holocausts and sin offerings you took no delight in.
Then I said, “As is written of me in the book,
I have come to do your will, O God.”

What is Paul trying to tell us?

In part at least, I think he is trying to say that prayer and practice depend upon one another. Prayer is important. We no longer engage in sacrifices and holocausts, but we have our own rituals. And they are important. They remind us of who we are, and of who we aspire to become. They draw our minds up from everyday life and reconnect us with what we hold sacred, with what gives our everyday life its meaning and purpose. They give us a sense of belonging to a reality far larger than the confines of our own skin. But unless we practice in our everyday life what we pray on Sunday, we are only fooling ourselves. Unless we practice what we pray we are not really praying at all. We are really only daydreaming, imagining we are someone we are not.

Prayer is essential to the Christian life, but it is no substitute for living that life. Rather, prayer without practice is as sterile as practice without prayer. If we are to be holy, we must be whole. The practice of our everyday life must flow from our prayer and our prayer must flow from the practice of our everyday life.

We try to integrate our prayer and our practice as a parish through our outreach to those in need amongst us. Through our buying Christmas gifts for a needy family. Through putting on a dinner at Thanksgiving for the poor in our community. Through our monthly contribution to the local food pantry and to Dawn’s Northwest Autism, through funds raised by our men’s and women’s groups, from Cookie Crusades to Golfing Events. And we practice what we preach to our own, through visiting the sick and the dying among us. Through comforting the grieving at wakes and funerals. Through our prayer chain, in which we mobilize not only prayers, but also assistance to those in crisis. We do these things as a parish, not because we are supposed to but because it is who we are, and who we want to become as a community.

As in years past, at our Christmas liturgies Tuesday evening and Wednesday morning, our collection will go to Catholic Charities. They extend our Christian practice throughout the Spokane area, providing a refuge for those most on the edge. Their emphasis the last several years has been to offer affordable housing, in the belief that once given some existential security over their immediate living circumstances, other assistance they provide in health and nutrition, psychological support and job training will have a chance to lift them up and out of the cracks into which they have fallen. It is said that to give someone a fish is to feed them today, but to teach someone to fish is to feed them for a lifetime. Catholic charities goes one step further: giving people a home by the river.

I like to think that this is what Elizabeth afforded the young Mary, a poor and while trusting, I suspect also an anxious teenager who finds herself inexplicably pregnant in a small town full of gossipy neighbors. God sent an angel to explain the inexplicable to Joseph, but God did not send angels to all her neighbors and relatives. Mary travels to Elizabeth just when she starts to show, and tongues begin to wag. Elizabeth provides Mary some existential security from the shame and shunning that comes with bearing a child out of wedlock, particularly in a society as traditional and patriarchal as hers where the punishment for such a thing as we know from elsewhere in the bible is death by stoning. Elizabeth does not just give her a meal, or teach her how to cook, but gives her a place to stay, offering her some stability to sort things out, such that she could eventually pray the Magificat:

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord
My spirit rejoices in God my Savior
For he has looked with favor on his lowly servant
The Almighty has done great things for me,
Holy is his name.

We call this formerly poor anxious young girl, the ***blessed*** virgin Mary. Catholic Charities seeks to transform tragedies into blessings among the lowly among us. So I encourage you to think of the Christmas appeal as another item on your gift list. And as you pray over what to give, don't think about what you're supposed to do, think about who you are, and about who you would like to be.