

Homily for Trinity 17: Spiritual Progress
St. Clement of Alexandria Universal Catholic Church
October 16, 2011
Guest Homilist: Dr. Dennis Patrick Slattery

This past summer has been brutal to all of us in Texas; the heat, the absence of water, the lost crops, even some entire cities like Poteet south of San Antonio experienced the absence of water. The toll has been sharp and insistent. Where we live in the Hill Country of Texas, our well pump quit just 24 hours before I was to have major surgery. Thankfully, a responsive well drilling company in Farmer's Branch came to the rescue and in one day, the day of my hospital stay, they replaced the pump 300' down and replaced the pipes leading to it. What they could not do is tell my wife and me how much water was in the well and how long it would last if rain did not come soon. We became, as you can imagine, very frugal with every drop of water that came from the tap. We ceased watering any of our foliage, took showers several times a week at the local YMCA, and made sure water did not run unless we were directly using it. We became, for several months,

very intimate with scarcity and lived within that narrowed parameter. Such an experience of daily awareness of less, wrapped in a shroud of uncertainty, leads me to the readings for today. You can lead a homily to water, but you cannot make it drink. But I hope you will.

Part of the challenge of being a believing Christian is the ability to adapt to living in two worlds at once: the temporal world of matter and the spiritual realm of eternal imaginings. In 14th century Italy, the Florentine poet, Dante Alighieri (1264-1321) came on a brilliant solution to this duality. He created a poem of over 14,000 lines on the nature of love and its relation to knowledge. One of many ingenious devices in his poem is that he situated the action in what he called “animarum statem post-mortem,” in the state of souls after death. He then portrayed himself as a pilgrim who pilgrimages through three nether regions: Inferno, Purgatorio and Paradiso. He then recollects these harrowing, then hopeful and finally beatific experiences as poet beginning with a description in great and exact detail how he woke

in mid-life within a dark wood and ends with a vision of the blessed in the highest region of the Primum Mobile. His poem renders one of the finest and most complex spiritual odysseys ever written.

Paul's Epistle to Timothy, one reading for today, focuses on the other side of Dante's journey: that we come into the world with nothing and exit it with the same absence of baggage and possessions. What is Paul's sense of this reality of what I want to call scarcity, or even a certain poverty? That we travel in this life loosely outfitted, as Dante trod the three realms that he recollects as three terrains of the soul as it searches for the mystery of the Trinity. Paul suggests that being content with little is far superior than striving after more, even when we have what is beyond ample, or enough, in our lives

Not long ago, one of my best Depth Psychology students at Pacifica Graduate Institute in Santa Barbara, California, wrote her 350 page dissertation on one word: **Enough**. She posed the question at the beginning: what or how much is Enough? In her

work she used the classic texts by Ancius Severinus Boethius (480-535) a powerful Roman administrator, *The Consolation of Philosophy*. He wrote this classic text while in prison, where he was banished to on trumped up charges of Fraud. In these terrible conditions, stripped of everything, he becomes deeply depressed because he has lost a vast wealth and all possessions, including his family. In his prison cell one evening, as he tells his story, the figure of Lady Philosophy appears and engages him in conversation about the nature of happiness and what it includes; perhaps better said, what it **excludes**. Through these dialogues Boethius realizes that he has **Enough**, even in prison, with what appears to be nothing. Lady Philosophy reveals to him that not only can he be content in these surroundings; he can actually be happy.

St. Paul in today's reading contrasts those who survive with little with those who would be rich; therein begins the striving for Enough, which, in so many cases, is never sufficient, always suffering the anemia of lack, for the appetites that Dante shows so

vividly in his *Divine Comedy* through characters from history, mythology, poetry, as well as neighbors and enemies in Florence, corrupt members of the Papacy in Rome, all of whom are often insatiable when prodded by desire for more; Never Enough becomes the credo of those who strive for constant acquisitions.

There is another currency, according to Paul, that trims the sails of appetites that always seek for more of the world's goods: righteousness, goodness, faith, love, patience, meekness. We see rather quickly that these are less commodities than values, even treasured attitudes. In our world today, what a thing is worth is terribly confused with what value something has. I chuckle at times when, on the news, we are told what a Picasso or Rembrandt painting's value is: it sold at Sotheby's for 4 million, 6 million or 11 million dollars. Something is deeply estranged in the soul when we lose the ability to distinguish between worth and value. Paul's epistle is a pithy pronouncement of just such a distinction, as well as what forms of value breed contentment, which instigate

frustration because desire is like a wild horse stampeding through one's living room.

Like Dante, Paul tells Timothy to “lay hold on eternal life” where he and all of us are also called. The word vocation is a calling out, or a calling forth; what is the value of a vocation, a calling, a summons? Perhaps the most famous mythologist of the 20th. century, Joseph Campbell, had as one of his mantras regarding the heroic temper, which all of us have if we listen closely enough: The Call. Each of us is called to a life that is ours, not someone else's, he would often proclaim. But many do not *hear* the call; of those that do, many do not *heed* the call, refusing it for the comforts of home and the familiar. But the truly heroic temper, with sufficient courage, heeds the call. At that moment, writes Campbell, one gives oneself over to something much larger than one's self; otherwise one is on no more than an ego journey in the world. The true hero is called, as I believe Paul is suggesting, to the eternal life, to what the southern fiction writer, William Faulkner called in his Nobel Prize Speech of 1951 “eternal

verities”: pride and honor and courage and generosity. These are the qualities or characteristics of the commandment that Paul offers to Timothy that must be followed until the second coming. Here is what this calling looks and sounds like through the poetic image of one of our finest poets, Rainer Maria Rilke: He titles this poem “Sometimes a Man Stands Up During Supper.” RECITE IT.

Second Reading:

Let us change course now and move to the Gospel of Matthew: again the theme that unifies it is scarcity, this time in the image of a geography that is austere and scarce: the desert or wilderness. In the beginning of Matthew, chapter 11, Jesus has just been preaching to the 12 disciples; when he finishes, he leaves them to extend his ministry to the surrounding cities. John the Baptist at this time has been imprisoned and is awaiting his own crucifixion, his own sacrifice for his beliefs.

When John hears of Christ’s works, he sends two of his disciples to be instructed by him. When they find Jesus, they pose the following question to Him: “Are You the Coming One, or do

we look for another?” Jesus tells them simply: tell John what you see and hear. Pay attention, notice, take it in, make sense of it, then answer your own question; this is my sense of their exchange.

The next move on Jesus’ part is brilliant. He asks the multitude: “what did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind?” “Did you go out to the desert to see a prophet?” (Matt, 11:7). I think the scarcity theme reveals itself once again right here: the Baptist in the desert, wearing an animal skin, because he is close to the natural order of the world; who eats honey and locusts, the scarce but sufficient fare of one who wanders in the wilderness, on the outskirts of towns and cities, along the periphery of civilization; I have always loved John the Baptist; he is like the Green Man in mythology, one who remains close to vegetation, to the earth, like a latter-day Dionysos, who Christ then more fully embodies.

John is also associated with water, with cleansing, with renewal, with new beginnings, with wiping the slate clean and beginning once again. In his animal clothing he bridges worlds; the

human, animal or instinctive and divine, for he washes souls by cleansing their bodies. He is a marvelous poetic figure that inaugurates Christ's public life with a cleansing in the river Jordan. There is no doubt that Christ has a deep love for this powerful, lean figure of scarcity, who is completely content in his own and in his animal skin. John is double-skinned, thick-skinned, able to tolerate the excesses of desert climate and the sharp excessive barbs of his antagonists.

He is as well, according to Jesus' words here, a trail blazer, a preparer, a messenger that aids others in assuming the proper disposition for what is to follow. He is the Christ before the Christ; he is akin to the natural man, as Enkidu is to the young Gilgamesh, leader of the Sumerian people in the ancient Babylonian epic that antedates Christianity by millenia. But the brotherly contrast and complement is there as it is in John and Jesus; they are brothers who shape a new belief; the suggestion to us is that we need the wildness and honey and locust eating John as much as we need

Jesus' cultural expressions after John has baptized him, renewing him in the natural river water.

Then, in the sustained spirit of paradox for which Jesus is famous, he tells the multitude: "Amen I say unto you among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist" (Matt, 11:7). And another: notwithstanding, he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he." Here again, to loop back to St. Paul's Letter to Timothy, we are asked to imagine the realities of two worlds, in which the greatest in the temporal order are lower than the least in the eternal realm of paradise. If we don't understand it, then something is imperfect in our hearing: "He that hath ears to hear, let him hear" (Matt, 11:7).

For my own life, Christ is a poet: he wants us to know intuitively, through faith, not through discursive logic. While the logos, he also carries the energies of mythos; he speaks the story that resonates with every soul who has the capacity to grasp the paradoxes in his teaching, in the same way poetry is an expression of the individual's and the world's paradoxical nature. Can we

hold the tension of opposites, as Marion Woodman, a depth psychologist, asks of us? If we assent, then we can even now participate in the world to come with an abundance that relies or rests on the quality of scarcity.