

Commentary on the Gospel for Mon, Aug 11th 2014

In some restaurants the menu includes St. Peter's fish, where other restaurants simply list tilapia. There is indeed a tradition that tilapia was the fish caught by St. Peter in today's gospel reading. It could be that tilapia was abundant in that lake and it could also be that listing it as St. Peter's fish is considered a good marketing gimmick. Fish story aside, let me offer some reflections on the reading as a whole.

Jesus had some good idea of how the enmity of the religious leaders was going to evolve. The tension with them and to some extent with Herod was tangible and he knew that what happened to John the Baptist could also happen to him. So he shares his concern with his disciples. How we need a listening ear when we grieve! This was evident to me as hospital chaplain. Most of my ministry there was receiving the pain, grief and anxiety of patients and families. We all need an ear that listens, not just one that hears. And what does Jesus get for it? In today's passage he gets silence, depression: they were overwhelmed with grief, they could not absorb this grief. In a parallel passage [Mt. 16:22] Peter even remonstrates with Jesus after Jesus predicts his suffering. That was worse than silence. Respectful silence is always better than inconsiderate words. So Jesus appears to drop the subject.

And then comes the "fish story" without any apparent connection with what precedes it, except perhaps Jesus' own remark: that we may not offend them. The tension was bad enough already and his hour had not yet come. So why precipitate events?

Maybe we do not have all that much to learn from the "fish story" itself, but we can certainly learn from the preceding exchange. We need to pray for the gift of compassion, to be receivers of others' pain and grief. Now that in his glorified existence the Lord cannot grieve, it is for us to be receivers of others' grieving, to share in their grief. We are indeed Christ's body and some members of that body do grieve. They –ourselves at times– need a compassionate listener, a receiver of their pain. Remember that whatever you did for one of these little ones, you did for me [Mt. 25:40].

Today we celebrate the memorial of St. Clare. Both she and St. Francis were keen receivers of the Church's suffering and of its need to be rebuilt. But they were not overwhelmed with grief, as were the disciples. They were not depressed. They both started rebuilding the Church by rebuilding their own lives and in the process they contributed immensely to the rebuilding of the Church. Our present Pope chose St. Francis' name and appropriated the mission to rebuild the Church. Clearly none of us is in a position to rebuild the Church by ourselves, but with God's grace and encouragement we can start (or continue) rebuilding our own personal lives, confident that it will contribute to the rebuilding of the Church, even if we cannot measure the results in our own life time.

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