

Commentary on the Gospel for Tue, Jan 17th 2017

Today is the memorial of Saint Anthony, who is known for his role in the development of monastic life. For more on his life and this era of Christian history, see William Harmless, S.J., *Desert Fathers: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism*. The journeys of the desert fathers through the interior life and their spiritual struggles will inspire you.

Today's readings begin with an admonition to those who may be manifesting signs of frustration: do not give up! Stated differently, "do not become sluggish." I love the word sluggish. I tell my students that they will not miraculously become butterflies when they graduate; if they are slugs now, they will continue to be slugs! In so many things, incremental change is the source of real transformative power. Can we keep moving in the right direction? And can we restart when we get bogged down?

We sometimes run short of the "eagerness for the fulfillment of hope until the end", which the writer of Hebrews calls forth from those who may be in danger of becoming "sluggish". The world exerts a strong pull on our souls; the cares of this world can weight us down. Sometimes we even tire of doing good. When mundane aspects of our service seem to continue as regularly as the rising sun, with no relief in sight, we cry out for help. Sometimes we must bear up and take solace in the company of our brothers and sisters, rather than seeking out a personal pity party. Let us not forget that we are in this together, and many are doing more than we are doing. This is not a time for isolation, but for assembly and encouragement. We are stronger together. It is good to be part of the assembly of the just!

The gospel for today takes us through a field of wheat. Wheat fields remind me of the fruitfulness of the earth. If we pay attention, goodness is bursting forth all around us. But sometimes we miss it. The Pharisees here raise a question, but it does not seem genuine. The question really reflects an accusation, not an honest inquiry. Jesus teaches boldly here, asserting his role as Lord of the Sabbath. But note: the disciples did not take up a response; they just continued following him. I think there is a message for us here, too. Perhaps we are being called to keep following Jesus, even when others want to block the path, or maybe complicate it for us.

Saint Anthony sought a closer walk with Jesus through his trek into the desert. But we must find those footsteps in our daily trek through the supermarket, the schoolyard, the farm, the business, and the shop. Our lives may seem quite different from the desert fathers, but we can still learn from their journey as we seek to find the footsteps of Jesus and walk with him. Thanks be to God.