

SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME, 2023

During the past week we celebrated the Funeral Mass of Wes Mezler, a man very well known to many of you. Sharing in the common Christian vocation of holiness of life, he had the particular vocation of marriage and fatherhood (I understand that he and Coleen were the first couple to be married at the University of Wyoming's campus Catholic Church, St. Paul's Newman Center, on 10 October, 1958). Along with that high vocation, he was a remarkably active member of St. Barbara's Parish, acting at various times as Parish Trustee, Finance Council member, Scholarship Committee member, Building Committee member, Religious Education teacher, Funeral usher, and Knight of Columbus. Many of you know about the many ways in which he was active in the communities of the town of Powell, Park County, and the State of Wyoming. What many of you probably do not know about is one episode from his youth as a University of Wyoming wrestler, when Wes volunteered to wrestle up one weight class against Oklahoma's legendary 1950s hero Dan Hodge. Now, not only was Hodge legendarily strong, he was also a little mean. In Hodge's own words, "When I grabbed you, I'd see the expression come over your face. Now you know why I'm here, and I want all these people to watch you watch the ceiling" A man willing to go out of his way to tangle with Dan Hodge would, I think, approve of my saying that the Lord Jesus Christ's instructions in today's passage from the Sermon on the Mount (read chapters 5-7 of St. Matthew's Gospel) remind me a little of the training I once received in Jiu-Jitsu.

Now, one thing I liked about Jiu-Jitsu, at least as it was taught to me, is that its moves were reasonable. I certainly don't mean that they were easy, far from it; but they weren't surrounded by misty clouds of "feel the energy", or "be like a leaf in the wind", and that sort of thing. I don't like "martial arts" that are surrounded by misty clouds. As it happens, I don't like religion that is surrounded by misty clouds. The Lord Jesus is not misty in the Sermon on the Mount. What He says is not easy to live out, but you know what He means, and you're not having to deal with baffling expressions about "entering the cloud of unknowing", or "embracing nothingness", and that sort of thing. Very often, after demonstrating a Jiu-jitsu move, my instructor would ask "Does that make sense?" My usual answer was "It always makes sense - but making my body do it is a very different matter" So it is with the Lord's instructions in the Sermon on the Mount. They all make sense. Making our hearts and souls do them is a different matter.

This, of course, is where Grace enters in. The way of life taught to us by the Lord Jesus depends absolutely on His Grace. In that sense His teaching is mystical. We need supernatural help to live it out. It is not, however, mystical in the sense of being deliberately mysterious. To me, the Sermon on the Mount is as straightforward as Jiu-Jitsu training. The differences are that the Sermon on the Mount comes from Heaven, leads to Heaven, and can only be lived out with Grace from Heaven.

The Lord Jesus promises that Grace to all who ask for it (indeed, His Prevenient Grace inspires them to ask for that Sanctifying Grace). "Ask, and you shall receive". This, again, is straightforward. In the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord Jesus Christ does not seek to create a mystical elite. A century ago, Cardinal Gasquet is said to have quipped "The problem with

mysticism is that it begins in mist, and ends in schism” That is at least true of all false mysticism, that seeks mysteriousness for its own sake. True mysticism begins from straightforwardly hearing what the Lord has to say, being moved by His Prevenient Grace to ask for Sanctifying Grace, receiving that Grace, and then putting His teaching into practice.

The way of life the Lord Jesus teaches in the Sermon on the Mount is not easy. He warns “Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Scribes and the Pharisees, you will not enter the Kingdom of Heaven” Now, the Scribes were religious professionals. Originally the men who copied out the Hebrew Scriptures, they had become the recognized experts in the Hebrew Scriptures. The Pharisees were the party within Israel that made a point of living out the Law of the Hebrew Scriptures as rigorously as possible. If righteousness consisted simply of living out the written Law, it would not be possible to exceed the righteousness of the Scribes and the Pharisees. In today’s Gospel from the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord Jesus makes it clear that true righteousness goes far beyond, or rather beneath, the written Law. True righteousness is in the heart, a matter of habitual attitudes that amount to a supernatural standard of holiness. By Grace, with which we resolutely cooperate, the Lord Jesus promises that we can become a new kind of human being, changed from the inside out into God’s Saints.

Thus, the written Law declares, in Exodus and Deuteronomy, that “You shall not kill”. Surely. But the Lord Jesus wants us to go beneath that, to the heart. He forbids not only acts of homicide, but also harsh words, and even personal anger. As far as He is concerned, even personal anger is what we might call a misdemeanor, answerable to judgment in a local court. As far as the Lord Jesus is concerned, an actual insult is what we might call a felony, answerable to the high court, the Sanhedrin. And for a truly nasty insult, says the Lord Jesus, “You will be liable to fiery Gehenna”. Gehenna was originally the place outside Jerusalem where there was a constant fire for burning garbage. By the time of the Lord Jesus’ earthly ministry, “Gehenna” meant hell. As far as Jesus Christ is concerned, a truly nasty insult deserves hell. What a thought!

No. Jesus does not offer an easier teaching. His teaching is actually harder. It makes sense; but can we human beings actually make ourselves avoid insults, harsh words, and even personal anger? Yes, we can. “Give what You command, and then command what You will”, prayed St. Augustine (words that infuriated the arch heretic Pelagius). When He commands, the Lord Jesus also gives Grace to fulfill the command. By the help of His Grace, we really can avoid insults, harsh words, and even personal anger.

The written Law declares, in Exodus and Deuteronomy, that “You shall not commit adultery. Surely. But, again, the Lord Jesus wants to go beneath that, to the heart. He forbids not only sexual intercourse in violation of marriage vows and marriage rights, but also lustful stares, and even lustful thoughts. It might be said that for the Lord Jesus even a lustful thought is a misdemeanor, lustful stares are a felony, and actual adultery deserving of the fires of hell. To avoid going to Gehenna, the Lord Jesus says, cut off the path to adultery at its very start, in your thoughts. “If your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out!” This is not, of course, a command to mutilate ourselves. This is a quite deliberate dramatic overstatement, meant to alarm us. Naturally, Jesus seeks to alarm us only for our own good. He wants us to realize that sexual

sins really can lead us to an eternity in hell. The only way to be safe against grave sexual sins, is to avoid even the lesser sexual sins. No slope is more slippery than sex. Once someone gets off the narrow but solid path of chastity, both married and celibate, that person slides down fast. The words “If your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out” tell us to avoid the occasions of sin. Avoid whatever causes you to have lustful thoughts, says Jesus. Lustful thoughts eventually produce lustful stares, lustful stares produce lustful acts, and lustful acts lead to hell. Cut off that path at the start, He says. With the help of His Grace, we really can cut off that path, we can avoid lustful thoughts, and we can avoid the occasions of sin.

The written Law, in Deuteronomy, declares that divorce and remarriage is permitted. The Lord Jesus says that this easy standard is not open to His disciples. For His disciples, the Lord Jesus forbids divorce and remarriage, except for “porneia”. “Porneia” is a somewhat difficult Greek word, which various English language Bibles, unfortunately, translate differently. One thing is clear, however. Jesus Christ hates divorce. His disciples had better hate it too. Do you hate divorce? You should. The Lord Jesus means for the marriage of a man and woman to be for life. He means that quite seriously. The written Law allowed divorce because of human weakness. That was perfectly reasonable. The disciples of the Lord Jesus, however, have access through Him to the supernatural power we call “Grace”. By the Grace of God, the disciples of the Lord Jesus are empowered to stay married, man and woman, husband and wife, all their lives. Whatever “Porneia” means, it certainly means an extreme situation. Disciples of the Lord Jesus must regard divorce and remarriage as forbidden to them except in truly extreme circumstances. Jesus has more to say on this subject in Matthew 19: 1-12. For reasons beyond my understanding, this passage is not included in Sunday Mass readings (it comes up on Friday of the 19th Week of Ordinary Time). That is unfortunate, since this topic deserves a homily all to itself. There just isn’t time to get much into what the word “Porneia” means. The New American Bible translates that as “unlawful”, meaning a marriage that was never valid in the first place. This fits with the Catholic view of Marriage, but the word “unlawful” doesn’t capture the idea that ‘Porneia’ means something really, truly bad and filthy. Jesus hates divorce. His disciples are not to divorce and remarry unless something really, truly bad and filthy has happened.

Finally, for today’s Gospel, the written Law allows for swearing private oaths. Jesus tells His disciples not to try and decorate their “yes” or “no” with words like “I swear” or, worse, “I swear to God”. The firm tradition of the Catholic Church is that the Lord Jesus does not forbid His disciples to take public oaths, as required by lawful authority for the common good. Judges, public officials and soldiers are free to take their oaths of office. Physicians are free to swear their “Hippocratic Oath”. Witnesses in court are free to take their prescribed oath. Except as required by lawful public authority, however, disciples of the Lord Jesus are not to swear any oaths whatsoever. Why? Simply because they are always to tell the truth! We are always to tell the truth! The Lord Jesus, again, goes to the heart. By the help of His Grace, Who is Himself the Way, the TRUTH, and the Life, Jesus’ disciples are empowered to love the truth so much that they will never lie. Never lying, they need no oaths in private life to convince people of their sincerity. Those who cooperate with the Sanctifying Grace poured out by the Lord Jesus

speak and live with such integrity that, in private life, their honesty can be taken for granted. Their “yes” really does mean yes, and their “no” really does mean no.

It all makes sense. It is not needlessly mystical. It is simple and straightforward. But it is hard. Can we make ourselves live like this? Can we make ourselves avoid nasty insults, hasty words, and even any personal anger at all? Can we make ourselves avoid sexual intercourse in violation of marriage, lustful stares, and even lustful thoughts? Can we make ourselves avoid divorce and remarriage, except when something truly, really bad and filthy has happened? Can we be so committed to telling the truth that, in private life, our simple “yes” or “no” is all that people need to hear?

Yes, and no.

No, if we try all this only by our own will power.

Yes, if we attempt all this empowered by the Grace of God.

“Ask and you shall receive”, promises the Lord Jesus later in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 7:7). So, today, let us all together ask for the Grace to live as our “Coach” and Teacher has taught us to live. Having received that Grace in the Most Holy Eucharist, let us all together resolve to live that way all this coming week.