

ORDINARY SUNDAY XVI "A"      JULY 16/17, 2011

The iconic symbol of our Roman Catholic Church is St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. The present basilica, which replaced the original building on Vatican Hill erected by the Emperor Constantine and used for 1100 years, was begun by Pope Julius II on April 18, 1506. One hundred-twenty years later the building was completed and dedicated by Pope Urban VIII on November 18, 1626. In that time span there were 20 popes and 11 architects (some of the more famous being Bramante, Raphael, Michelangelo, Maderno and Bernini) and countless thousands of workers and craftsmen who labored on it. Along the way there were set-backs (footings had to be placed deeper to hold the building's weight), revisions of design by the different architects, the legendary temper tantrums of Pope Julius II, financing difficulties (one solution, the selling of indulgences helped fuel the fire of the Protestant Reformation). But through it all the day-to-day toil of the laborers gave themselves over to an enterprise that was bigger than themselves (or their egos), most of whom (except those who labored at the very end) did not live to see their work completed here on earth. This bit of church history can serve as a metaphor for our reflection on the message of the Scriptures we've just heard.

In the gospel Jesus gives three parables, the point of each is that the "kingdom of heaven" is an evolving mystery which is continually being established by a God who is amazingly patient. In the first, God exercises patience until the wheat grows enough so that the weeds can be pulled without destroying the wheat. In the second, God waits patiently until the tiny seed grows into a large enough plant to welcome the birds of the sky. In the third, God patiently allows time for the yeast to work its leavening effect on the dough. The message is very clear: God, as we hear from the author of the book of Wisdom in the first reading, exercises divine patience in his relationship with the natural and human orders of creation, patiently waiting, especially in our case, tolerating our foibles, idiosyncrasies and (most amazingly of all) even our sins as Wisdom states, "judging us with clemency, governing us with leniency, permitting time for us to repent from our sins". We are being encouraged and challenged today to a like patience, a virtue that enables us to wait for the maturing of persons, abilities and ideas, including growth in ourselves.

Patience is virtue hard to come by today. Be at the head of a line of traffic when the light turns green and if (at least in my Baltimore days) you fail to instantly put your car in motion you hear from the other drivers behind you! We live in a “sound bite” culture. We expect explanations or answers to complex human or spiritual issues in a time frame of 10-30 seconds. We have a host of food choices that if not ready “instantaneously” can be ready in five minutes or less. Even then, have you ever caught yourself “drumming” your fingers on the kitchen counter in front of the microwave because your food wasn’t cooking fast enough? We’re “wired” to our various communication technologies with their instantaneous connections. There certainly is a good side to modern technology, however, there can be a downside as well. Our cultural experiences can lead us to fall prey to the temptation that human and spiritual development personally, as well as that of others (spouse, children, co-workers, etc.) should also be “instantaneous” and if not, be at some pre-determined stage that we or someone else (whom we call them “experts”) has determined. We have forgotten, or perhaps never learned, how to take the “long view”, to allow or create time to mull, ponder, and reflect--on life, ourselves, God and God’s place and plan in our lives. We need to hear and act on the wisdom of the New Testament epistle writer known as James when he says: “see how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and late rains” (Ja. 5:7). A good spiritual practice is to take at least five minutes each day (longer if you can), turn off all the technology, take a few deep breaths, realize you are in the presence of God, and simply rest in his presence. Or consider spending some time in quiet in the Burke Chapel before the exposed Blessed Sacrament in prayer and quiet reflection, perhaps reading some favorite passage of Scripture, and open your heart to any message Jesus may have for you. You might be quite surprised! In relationships with others try exercising the wisdom I once saw on a plaque on a fellow priest’s desk: “Be patient. God isn’t finished with me yet,” exercising the same kind of care, leniency, justice and kindness we ask of God on our behalf.

Like St. Peter’s Basilica, God is slowing and surely crafting a beautiful dwelling out of each of us. We need to patiently open ourselves to cooperation with his work.