

Bottomless Barrel-ness

1 Kings 17:10-16
Psalm 146
Hebrews 9:24-28
Mark 12:41-44

The image of a bottomless barrel has often been used to describe the endless demands of life; that, despite our best efforts, we never have enough to accomplish what life asks of us. Throughout the past year, God has been slowly teaching me about the importance of the “bottomless barrel-ness” of priestly ministry.¹ The Year of the Priesthood and our Scripture readings this weekend give us a perfect opportunity to explore this challenging aspect of priesthood and life.

In the first reading today, we heard how the prophet Elijah asked a poor widow for some water and bread. Her response can be summarized, “I have nothing...” (1 Kings 17:12). She explained to the prophet that she had nothing baked and the little bit of ingredients she had she was going to use to prepare one final meal for her and her son before they died from hunger. The prophet’s response to the widow’s poverty has wonderful and amazing consequence for priests and all Christians. He told her—

“Do not be afraid. Go and do as you propose. But first make me a little cake and bring it to me. Then you can prepare something for yourself and your son. For the LORD, the God of Israel, says, “The jar of flour shall not go empty, nor the jug of oil run dry, until the day when the LORD sends rain upon the earth.”

-1 Kings 17:13-14

We are told that, “She left and did as Elijah had said” and that “the jar of flour did not go empty, nor the jug of oil run dry” (1 Kings 17:15-16). Not only was Elijah asking for what seemed impossible, but the widow seemed acutely aware of her own poverty. Despite the fact that the widow did not have enough, she gave the little she had and demonstrated great trust in God.

Like the widow, priests are very aware of the impossible request being made of us and the very little we have to give. Like so many vocations, the reality of priestly ministry is that, no matter how many hours priests work each day, no matter how many days off we spend working and vacation days we use to try to get caught up, we *never* get caught up. There is *always* something that is left undone—a phone call we didn’t make, a parishioner we needed to visit, an e-mail without a reply, an appointment that couldn’t be squeezed in, etc. One of the most important lessons that God has to teach each of us priests is that the “bottomless barrel-ness” of priestly ministry actually *comes from Him* and is part of His call for us to *radically trust Him*. This is something that cannot be taught in seminary, but has to be taught directly by God. And, *until* a priest realizes that the “bottomless barrel-ness” of ministry comes from God, he will more than likely fall into one of two pitfalls.

In his book, The Meaning of Christian Priesthood, Fr. Gisbert Greshake explains that there are two popular pitfalls that priests must try to avoid as they come to terms with the “bottomless barrel-ness” of ministry—“incredible activity” and “resigned inertia.” He writes—

¹ Yes, I did just make up the phrase “bottomless barrel-ness”!

A thousand requests, demands, expectations are put to the priest from people needing help and seeking counsel, from the parish or from the diocesan chancery. Some priests respond with incredible activity, trying to fill this “bottomless barrel,” usually feeling, however, that they are doing too little. The result is stress, activism, and “a motor which is running idle.” The others become tired and resign themselves to attending only to what is absolutely necessary, since they see that they are permanently overstrained, and realize that it is impossible to do everything.

-The Meaning of Christian Priesthood, pg. 147

As we learn to trust God in the bottomless barrel-ness of ministry and avoid these two pitfalls, we find that God can do far more thru us than we ever thought possible; working, as Father Greshake describes, “calmly with interior serenity” (pg. 147). After ten years of priesthood, I am just beginning to understand the importance of all of this and its consequences for my life. God has begun to ask more of me and I have to trust Him more deeply.

One example of this call to trust is the fact that I will be starting a Mass in Spanish at Christ the King in January. Fr. Jon McDougal and I are both going to start Masses in Spanish. Beginning the second week of January, St. Boniface will offer a Mass in Spanish on Saturday evening and Christ the King will offer one on Sunday afternoon or evening. The details have not been worked out yet, but the priests at Immaculate Conception have very generously offered to handle every other aspect of Hispanic ministry while we see what kind of response we get at our Spanish Masses.

When I begin worrying about how I will add another thing to my calendar, I am reminded that, like Jesus, I am unable to meet the needs of everyone and God doesn't expect me to. Just as Jesus almost always focused on just one person in every crowd and tried to be truly present to that one,² I am invited to trust God and simply try to focus on the “one thing necessary” at any given moment.³

This Year of the Priesthood is a wonderful opportunity for priests to be reminded that our vocation is ultimately not to fill up calendars and start new programs, but rather, to be “credible signs of hope, of love, of mercy;” to “listen to the call of the hour, in which [we] find the call of the Father” to trust Him, to admit we have nothing and He has everything.⁴

SUGGESTED PRAYER EXERCISES:

- ✚ Spending some time in prayer, reflecting on the story of Martha and Mary in Luke 10:38-42. What aspects of busyness tend to cause you to fall into the pitfalls of “incredible activity” or “resigned inertia”?
- ✚ In Gisbert Greshake's book, The Meaning of Christian Priesthood, he writes, “Some spheres of activity will simply have to be abandoned, even with the clear knowledge that they are at times most important” (pg. 148). What are some of those “spheres of activity” that, although they are important, God might be asking us to let go of?

² The story of Zacchaeus is a great example of this (Luke 19:1-10).

³ See the story of Martha and Mary in Luke 10:38-42.

⁴ The Meaning of Christian Priesthood, pg. 148.