

July 4, 2018

Greetings to all the Faithful of St. Andrew's,

Christ is among us!

This week's Gospel is taken from Matthew 9:1-8.

In this story Jesus "came to his own city." Jesus tells a paralyzed man to "Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven." He is then accused of blasphemy by religious leaders after which he says to the man "Rise, take up your bed and go home." At the end of the text we read "when the crowds saw it, they were afraid, and they glorified God, who had given such authority to men."

This week's Gospel reading follows immediately upon last week's reading. Last week we read about Jesus entering a Gentile city, casting out demons and then meeting with a negative response.

In both cases Jesus is bringing God's word, power and kingdom to the attention of the people. Some other similarities between the two narratives are the following:

First: Jesus entered a city. Second: Jesus did a miracle. Third: Jesus caused offense and was opposed.

Some differences between the two narratives are the following:

1. In the one story he entered a Gentile city where people lived in ignorance of God's law and unclean behavior (symbolized by the herd of swine) with the result that individuals were subject to the influence of demons. When Jesus was asked to leave on account of the death of the swine, which resulted from the healing, it amounted to saying, "Casting out the demons from the two men was a wonderful humanitarian act but the consequences were bad for business, so you have to leave now."
2. In this week's reading Jesus entered a Jewish city where the Word of God should have been taught so that the people might know and walk according to the commandments of God and be subject to God's Spirit. When the religious leaders felt their authority threatened and labeled Jesus a blasphemer, it amounted to saying something like: "Yes, sins should be forgiven in God's name and people should be taught how to walk in God's Law. But it's not your concern; we'll get to it in our own time; you have no right to show us up!"

Jesus wants to enter our midst, heal us, and bring us into the heavenly City where God alone is praised, and where only his interests are at the center of the human heart. Are we consciously seeking to live in God's city, his Kingdom? No human being who is born has any say about where he or she comes from. We however, when hearing the words of Jesus, are given an opportunity to choose God and his Kingdom. And if we choose to live and walk as citizens of this Heavenly City, which is what we are claiming to do every time we recite the Lord's Prayer, then we are committing ourselves to receive and give forgiveness, getting off our beds of spiritual sickness, and learning to walk in the way of God. The results of this forgiveness, which come through the Teaching and entails the responsibility to walk according to it, is that we are living under the influence of the Holy Spirit and not demonic spirits.

As we celebrate this 4th of July and pray for all of the leaders of the different branches of the government of our country, let us remember also that the believer's primary citizenship is in heaven and not on this earth. Paul writes to the Church at Ephesus: "You are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built into it for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit." (Ephesians 2:19-22).

For the believer, God's Word in the Scriptures are the measure of proper thinking and right behavior regarding love of God and love of neighbor. There are many different voices in the world that are vying for our attention and worship which should be directed to God alone through knowledge gained by Scripture reading and prayer. For the believer, God alone must be first in the heart, mind and soul. Many seek greatness in this world, but believers seek God. The Psalmist prays, "May all who seek thee rejoice and be glad in thee; may those who love thy salvation say continually, 'Great is the LORD!'" (Psalm 40:16).

At the end of this message I leave you all with the Apostolic Word of Saint John: "We know that we are of God, and the whole world is in the power of the evil one. And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, to know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life. Little children, keep yourselves from idols" (1 John 5:19-21).

Yours in Christ,
Fr. Herman