

Monday, March 25, 2013
Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament, Altoona
Chrism Mass
Homily

A lay missionary was working as a translator among a group of native people in South America. This group of people had kept their native language instead of the national language of Spanish. His work focused on preparing a translation of the Sacred Scriptures and basic catechetical texts.

He was translating the Prophet Isaiah; it was the very text we heard in the first reading today. The lay missionary was having difficulty in finding the right word for comfort as Isaiah speaks of comfort for all who mourn.

In the limited vocabulary of the local people, there was no word for comfort. He was hoping that there might be an expression that would have the same meaning.

Timeteo was a young man who belonged to the local native people. He had received baptism and was working for the missionary team. One day the translator heard Timeteo request permission to have two extra weeks off from work. He explained that his uncle had died and he wanted to visit his widowed aunt who had no children. Timeteo said, "I need to help her heart around the corner."

As Timeteo was about to leave, the translator apologized for overhearing his conversation and then thanked him for his help. "To help her heart around the corner" was just the expression he needed to complete his translation of the reading from Isaiah.

The word "comfort," and Timeteo's expression, "help her heart around the corner," would apply to the multiple circumstances in which the people of God receive the oil of gladness that replaces all of the experiences that prevent them from experiencing God's peace a joy.

In the Gospel reading, Jesus announces that the Spirit of the Lord has anointed him to

- bring glad tidings to the poor
- proclaim liberty to captives
- recovery of sight to the blind
- let the oppressed go free, and
- proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord.

The glad tidings that we need to bring is the Gospel of Jesus Christ whole and entire. The poor include not only those lacking in material wealth, but anyone who has heard other than or less than the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The liberty that needs to be proclaimed is the freedom that comes from being true children of God. The captives are those whose freedom is limited by following anyone and anything other than the Lord God.

The recovery of sight is the restoration of a clear vision of the Kingdom of heaven that was introduced by Jesus Christ. The blind are those who are unable to see the goodness of that Kingdom, the true beauty of the earth, and the God-given dignity of every human person.

The oppressed are all around us, including ourselves, whenever or wherever basic human rights are threatened or prohibited, including the natural rights to life and to religious freedom.

And we could say that the year acceptable to the Lord might just be not only this Year of Faith, but also this time in which we the Church begin to follow the leadership of our new Holy Father Francis.

In listening to the readings from Sacred Scripture today, I could not help but think that the Word of God in this liturgy is speaking to us about the New Evangelization. The New Evangelization calls each of us to deepen our faith, believe in the Gospel message and go forth to proclaim the Gospel.

In a special way, the New Evangelization is focused on 're-proposing' the Gospel to those who have experienced a crisis of faith, especially due to secularization.

What exactly is this secularization? Above all it has to do with the situation in which many people perceive that they have no need for salvation; they have no need for the Gospel of Jesus Christ; and they have no need for God.

It is in this sense that Christ speaks about the poor, the imprisoned, the blind, and the oppressed. These are the one's who are especially in need of someone to help their heart around the corner. These are the one's who are in need of comfort.

The word comfort has more than one meaning:

- it means to ease someone's grief or trouble
- it means to offer encouragement
- it means to give strength and hope to someone
- it means to exhort and counsel by sharing the truth.

So the important question is how can we bring on this New Evangelization?

In order to help someone's heart around the corner, it is necessary to speak to the heart, to the very core of that person.

It's been said that the Liturgy teaches us; it informs us about the mysteries of Faith and it forms us in the manner of Jesus Christ. In addition to the Liturgy of the Word of the Chrism Mass, there are three other distinct, but related actions celebrated today that have something to do with helping the hearts of others around the corner.

The first of these actions is the renewal of the commitment to priestly service by all the priests here present. I am confident that my brother priests understand that the commitment to priestly service involves accepting once again a share in the pastoral office of Jesus Christ who announces in the Gospel reading today that he has come to

- bring glad tidings to the poor
- proclaim liberty to captives
- recovery of sight to the blind
- let the oppressed go free, and
- proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord.

I have to tell you my brother priests that I have prayed long and hard about speaking to you about your role in bringing comfort to others; in helping the hearts of others around the corner. I have been thinking and praying about it because I know that you are also in need of the kind of comfort that Jesus speaks about in today's Gospel.

Ever since I was made your bishop, I have been encouraging and challenging you to work together with me at building up our unity as a presbyterate and to work together in discerning how we can best serve the people of our diocese who are entrusted to our care.

I am encouraged by the progress made in following that path. At the same time I understand how it may be a discouragement or disappointment for you to hear and read about recent difficulties in our diocese. As you are about to renew your priestly commitment, I first want to renew my commitment to you to help your hearts around the corner.

And I want to make you aware of the source of evangelical comfort that I have been blessed to receive in abundance in the face of many difficult challenges. People often tell me that they pray day after day for you and for me that we will live our priestly commitment and exercise our priestly ministry in love and truth and integrity.

The people of God who are entrusted to our pastoral ministry really care about you and me. They want to help your heart and my heart around the corner. What an awesome Easter gift for us! Please let them do that for you, because they are depending on you and me to help their hearts around the corner as well.

They are depending on all the priests of our diocese, including me, to fulfill our priestly commitment. That unique priestly commitment to helping the hearts of others around the corner is through our proclamation of God's word; our living that word; and our celebrating the sacred mysteries.

If you and I are to be instruments of the New Evangelization, it is not enough to rely on our own talents, abilities or ideas. You and I must be close to the person of Jesus Christ in our own prayer; our own daily meditation on the word of God; and in our own reception of the sacraments which are necessary for our continued growth in holiness.

Do not forget or exclude or drift away from the person of Jesus Christ who wants to help your heart and my heart around the corner. Without Christ, any renewal of priestly commitment will be superficial and ineffective.

The second action of this Chrism Mass that is a powerful means for helping the heart of others around the corner is in the blessing of the Oil of Catechumens, the Oil of the Sick, and the Sacred Chrism. These represent in a tangible way the oil of gladness with which Jesus was anointed and with which he wishes to anoint others through us.

Our world and our people need the comfort described in the Gospel.

- Our world needs the comfort that eases someone's grief or trouble in a world that often reacts without understanding or in a more callous way by saying "Get over it."
- Our world needs the comfort that offers encouragement in the face of so many challenges and circumstances that devalue the joy that comes from listening to and following the Gospel of Jesus Christ.
- Our world needs the comfort that gives strength and hope to those who are weak and without hope because they do not know Jesus Christ.
- Our world needs the comfort which exhorts and counsels others by sharing the truth about their real human dignity and goodness according to the teaching of Christ and the Church.

The blessing of the oils takes on a significant importance in the persons representing the parishes and institutions in our diocese as they take the Holy Oils to those places. It is a sign of their dedication to helping the heart of others around the corner.

The third remaining action of this Chrism Mass that exemplifies the ministry of comfort described by Isaiah and our Lord Jesus Christ in today's Gospel is the Liturgy of the Eucharist. That is where we are so closely associated with the mystery of Christ's death on the cross.

It is through his death and resurrection that Christ has redeemed the whole world. It is through his death and resurrection that Christ helps the heart of each of us around the corner from death into life.

St. Augustine reminds us in the Office of Readings this morning that Jesus Christ is our hope, even though his glory comes from his passion and death on the cross.

And in the few days of his new ministry, Our Holy Father Pope Francis has frequently mentioned that our work, the work of the Church must always have the cross as the essential point of reference.

The cross of Jesus Christ points the way and is the way to salvation and eternal life. If we fail to offer that comfort, if we fail to help the hearts of others around the corner in the direction of the Kingdom of Heaven, then we have not effectively proclaimed the favor from God that is fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen.

Jesus continues to carry out his saving work in a wonderful way through the sacraments, especially the Holy Eucharist which is the source and summit of Christian life. In the sacraments, Jesus gives us strength, guidance, encouragement, and relief from our burdens.

As we heard from the Book of Revelation, “Behold, he is coming amid the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him.”

And how will every eye see the Christ? This Chrism Mass is all about celebrating God’s love for us through Jesus Christ our Lord. And what comes next is all about what a young man Timeteo said: we need to help the heart of others around the corner.