

Weekly Musing † May 2, 2011

The bishop was here this past Sunday but I had the Saturday service as usual and preached on St. Monnica (Monica). I used this picture from the artwork inside the relatively new Roman Catholic Cathedral in Los Angeles. It is by John Nava. It shows Monica as a younger woman. Sometimes we like our saints to look old or impossibly virtuous so as to remove them far from us lest the holy contagion of their sacrifice affect us.



St. Monica,



St. Augustine



St. Augustine and St. Monica -Ary Scheffer (1795-1858)

Monica was of course the mother of St. Augustine (354 – 430), one of the most influential of Christian writers and theologians. You may think you do not know him, but you know some of his writings through famous quotes:

Love the sinner and hate the sin.

You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.

Give me chastity and continence, but not yet.

There is no salvation outside the church.

If you were the only person on earth, Christ would have still suffered and died for you.

And some you should know but probably don't:

So give to the poor; I'm begging you, I'm warning you, I'm commanding you, I'm ordering you.

Bad times, hard times, this is what people keep saying; but let us live well, and times shall be good. We are the times: Such as we are, such are the times

Christ is not valued at all unless He be valued above all.

Of course quotes, even those from scripture, are dangerous because they don't tell the whole story. Their glory is brevity and that is their curse as well.

However, this is supposed to be about Monica and not Augustine. Monica is known to us primarily from her son's best known book "Confessions." It is difficult to read because it is part biography, part philosophy, part theology and part prayer. Two episodes involving Monica are both famous. One is an occasion when Augustine and Monica have a discussion of heaven in which they both seem to enter a mystical state. It is moving and is that bit of glory all lives need at least a little of. The other famous part is the description of Monica's death. She grew ill in Ostia, a port in Italy near Rome. Their native country was North Africa. One thus supposed she and her son were both of Semitic extraction since that area was settled by the Phoenicians. As she lay dying, her son lamented that she could not be buried next to her husband. She said it did not matter and asked only one thing: that she be remembered at the Lord's table. As I said in concluding the sermon on Saturday, we will do just that.



Death of St. Monica, by Gozzoli 1464

Monica was not the bright shining star her son was. In our age that so values fame (of any sort, it would seem) she is a supporting actor. The world has more supporting actors than it does leading actors. Monica reminds us of what it is to serve. Both history and Augustine have regarded her prayers for him as the precipitating cause of his conversion. To be the one who serves is the essence of being a Christian.

I think I might be remiss if I say nothing about today's headlines, the killing of Osama Bin Laden. I spent some time vehemently disagreeing with my fellow Christians about this. It seems to me as a culture we do ethical thinking poorly. It is easier to simply go with our visceral feelings or pick a simplistic condensation of Christianity that seems to fit all occasions.

I am glad Bin Laden is dead and I make apology neither to God nor man. If we lived in paradise or a perfect world, the death of anyone would be a tragedy. However when someone is the cause of death of thousands of people, many of them innocents (and many of them Moslems as well), and when he is utterly unrepentant and would be glad to wreak more havoc, I think the interests of justice are well served by his demise. This is not the same as a murderer in prison whose incarceration removes him as a threat to society. Bin Laden was not in prison. He was a very real danger.

On the whole Christianity rightfully eschews violence. Surely, however, we need to protect the innocent, and proclaim the importance of doing so. In our rush to pronounce forgiveness and makes all things well, we forget that our failure as Christians to work for justice and protect the innocent scandalizes those who are victims of injustice. This man was a serious source of injustice. "Inspiring" a teenager to be a suicide bomber is wrong. Forgiveness is at the center of Christianity. However, forgiveness is best accomplished by the one wronged forgiving someone who is repentant. We sometimes rush to what is often called "cheap grace" because it is easier and we don't get our hands as dirty.

Feel free to disagree with me on this, you won't be the first. You may also have to wait in line.

News from St. Luke's

It was good to have the bishop here and have our acolytes recognized. Later that day almost all of the area clergy went to the ordination to the priesthood of Karen King in Miles City. I got home after 9 pm -- a long day.

The Bible study will meet this Tuesday at 6 pm. I believe we had agreed to have it a potluck after Lent so let's try and see if it works. I promise to try and be done by 7:30 pm.

