

August 11, 2013: Preparing for the Unexpected

Dear Brothers and sisters, in recent years, so-called "reality shows" have enjoyed great popularity among the television viewing public. Unscripted and usually featuring unknown actors in key roles, each of the series relies on the unpredictability of its actors for its enormous appeal.

Consider, for instance, the series "Undercover Boss". It features a C.E. O. of a company who is disguised as a low paid employee and works alongside employees who are usually the most under appreciated and neglected of all those on the payroll. The reversal of roles is what makes the show so entertaining. The head of a company assumes the role of a blue collar worker and mixes with them as one of their class. Though obviously improbable, the series appeals to the viewing public, undoubtedly due to its creative approach.

As one who was raised on television, I have vivid recollections of the memorable characters that played the role of a house servant on many television series. Perhaps you remember Lurch (The Addams Family), Alice (The Brady Bunch), Hop Sing (Bonanza), Mr. French (Family Affair) and Jeffrey (The Prince of Bel Air). Can you possibly imagine Ben Cartwright assuming the role of a servant and serving Hop Sing a meal? Or, even more improbable, Morticia Addams as a housekeeper and cook serving Lurch a meal?

What is truly astonishing about many of Our Lord's parables is that he shatters all our expectations. In the parable of the Prodigal Son, a spoiled, ungrateful son is welcomed back by his father after squandering his inheritance. A Samaritan comes to the aid of a Jew after he had fallen victim to robbers. A shepherd leaves behind ninety-nine of his sheep and goes in search of the lost one. Where is the logic? These parables speak to us about the mysteries of the kingdom of God.

If we wish to learn about what God is like, then the parables are most instructive for our benefit as baptized Christians. In today's parable (Lk. 12:35-38) we once again are surprised. In the words of Professor Jeremias, a noted scripture scholar of the last century, "First of all we are struck by the rewarding of the watchful servants. Truly, I say to you, He will gird Himself, have them sit at table and he will come and serve them. No earthly master behaves like that--- but Jesus has done so and he will do so on his return".

The mystery of today's parable anticipates the Last Supper, during which Jesus stated, "I am among you as one who serves", and who dropped to his knees to wash the feet of his disciples. The shock of the Lord playing the role of a slave!

What lessons can we derive from today's Gospel?

First, it is a wake-up call for those who have neglected the practice of the faith. On the day that they are summoned, will they be ready to answer the Lord's call? Secondly, all Christians must be vigilant and pray unceasingly.

This second lesson reminds me of an extraordinary moment in my life dating back to the early 1990's. At the time, I celebrated Mass daily for a cloistered community of nuns, the Carmelites, in Schenectady.

The Carmelites live a penitential life behind closed doors. Their life is dedicated to prayer and works of sacrifice. Early one morning after Mass the Superior of the Community requested that I anoint one of her Sisters who was close to death. There was never a question of refusing her humble request. I proceeded to follow her into the enclosed section of the monastery. I recall that I fully expected to see a woman writhing in pain with a look of anguish on her face.

Much to my surprise, I found the nun, Sr. John Baptist, smiling and most eager to see me. As I was leaving the Sister's cell, I remarked to Mother John that I was stunned by the Sister's cheerful demeanor in the face of certain death. I was puzzled. Mother John replied: "Her joy surprises you? But she has lived for this moment her entire religious life." I then asked for a further explanation. She said "She desires to behold the face of Jesus. And for that event to happen, she must first die". I finally understood.

Sr. John Baptist watched...

She waited...

She prayed unceasingly...

And it is our Faith that teaches us that she beheld the face of Christ at the moment of her death.

We live in hope of greeting our Lord Jesus. Let us be watchful and prayerful. Let us live the faith until we see Him face to face.

Amen