

30<sup>th</sup> Sunday 2017

Choir Sings “A Mighty Fortress is our God”

I'm sure that some of you know the reason that I asked the choir to begin the homily with A Mighty Fortress is Our God. Yes, this hymn, written by Martin Luther was the rallying cry for the Protestant Reformation. This Tuesday marks the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 95 Theses that Luther proposed, challenging the Church authorities of the time to “reform”. Luther, an Augustinian monk at the time was “convicted” reading Paul’s letter to the Romans. He realized that the Roman Church was wrong in its practice of selling indulgences, as if one could “buy one’s way into heaven”. (It’s ironic that that heavy metal song that I played last week at the end of the homily had that very title! Buying my way into heaven”. At the heart of Luther’s call for reform was the realization that “all is grace”. We human beings are not “justified”, made right by our own actions but rather by the Cross of Jesus Christ. For the past few weeks those of you who come to daily mass have been listening to Paul’s letter to the Romans and you can understand why Luther was so “convicted” by Romans. Over and over again Paul says “we are justified by faith”. We do not earn salvation. It is gift. It is grace. Or in other words, “Is life a gift? Or is it a test? Is life about earning “good marks”? Is the purpose of our life on this earth “to prove that we are worthy of God’s love” or is it “to let ourselves be loved and love in return”?

After 500 years of listening to Luther’s critique, the Roman Church may be coming around to seeing things his way, at least partially. No one can “buy their way into heaven”. There is no marketing strategy that will assure us of a place in God’s kingdom. And yet we do believe that the way we respond to God’s invitation to love makes a difference. We may not be able to “buy or earn” our salvation but we are called to live in right relationship with God and our neighbor BECAUSE God has first loved us in Jesus Christ and through our baptism we are re-formed in the image of Jesus Christ, in his death on the Cross and his resurrection from the Dead. In a way we could say that we are the Grateful Dead. For we have died with Christ

and are already sharing in his Risen Life. (Yes, I was tempted to play some Grateful Dead music at this point!) We who are already dead are called to live Gratefully!

But seriously! If we have already died with Christ and are risen with him, how are we called to live in the here and now? That's where today's scriptures can be helpful for understanding. Exodus is very clear that to live in right relationship with God we must embrace the other, the alien, the stranger, the immigrant, the refugee. We must care for the widow and the orphan, the poor and the outcast. At the heart of the covenant God made with the people of Israel is the two fold command "to love the Lord with all your heart and soul and mind and strength and your neighbor as yourself. (the mezuzah as you enter the homes of a Jew). Jesus quotes the scriptures in Matthew's gospel. Luke, of course, has Jesus enfleshing the question "who is my neighbor by telling the story of the Good Samaritan. Although the question is not posed in Matthew's gospel at this point. The answer is given in Matthew 25. Whenever you fed the hungry, clothed the naked, etc. you did this to me. Your neighbor is anyone in need. And in the neighbor we encounter Christ.

If life is a gift, it's not just for me. It's meant to be shared. That's why we cannot ignore, pass by, shut out the other. We are called to live in response to the love that we have received in Christ Jesus.

This was at the heart of Luther's "conviction". And yes, God was a mighty fortress, a rock, shelter from the stormy blast. But also this Fortress God, This Bulwark God justifies us humans through the human/divine Jesus, born into our world. A Mighty Fortress may be the rallying cry of the Reformation but another piece written by Martin Luther, reminds us of the tenderness of God whom we are called to live with all our heart and mind and strength.

Choir sings Away in a Manger