

LITURGY OF THE WORD

and Commemoration of St. Rose of Lima

Homily Offered by Mary Ellen Sheehan, IHM

IHM Chapel, Monroe, MI Aug. 23, 2021

Texts: First Thess 1:1-5; 8b-10 Matt 23:13-22

We have two contrasting texts to contemplate this morning. Paul takes a gentle approach to the community in Thessalonica before, in later chapters, he calls them to a deeper grasp of the Gospel, urging them to give up their immoral practices. Jesus, on the other hand, is really wound up and scolds some of the scribes and Pharisees with a substantive list of woes, pointing to their hypocrisy and even calling them frauds! This is the *Jewish Jesus* assuming the prophetic role, like Isaiah before him who has a list of six woes in his Chapter five, including excessive gaining of property at the expense of the poor, lazy and privileged drunkenness, and accepting lucrative bribes!

The Evangelist's context is important to understand in order to see *why* and *what* pushed Jesus into this very tough talk. The Matthean author was most likely writing this Gospel in Syria after the collapse of the Temple in 70 A D, where some diaspora Jews had fled and who then came to know Jews already there who had become committed followers of Jesus. The issue then was to figure out what is the Law of Moses *largely proclaimed – the Law of Love* – and what are the laws that have accumulated from the teachers in the tradition that have narrowed and excluded people from *the Law of Love*. This was a situation not unlike our own today, when there are disputes in our USA civic order about the meaning of the Constitution and in our church about the correct interpretation of Vatican II.

And so, the Evangelist sets up the scene to make his point. In an earlier chapter, Jesus has entered Jerusalem on a donkey, not like a big time King who would have come stomping in on a huge stallion horse and with his army. But this *Jesus King of the Jews* has no army, only some disciples whom he is still forming in this way of love. Of course, now in Jerusalem, Jesus attracts the attention of some of the Scribes and Pharisees who challenge Him on his understanding of the Law, and so the interaction ensues dramatically.

Jesus takes hold at a certain point and gives a fiery response to some of their assertions! He pitches the woes at the Scribes and Pharisees who take privileges and self-inflate their importance over the little ones, who condemn them for their meagre offerings, and who obligate the poor to themselves because of their privileged understanding of the Law. The woes, though, are also for the instruction of the followers of Jesus because of what is going to happen to Jesus and to them in the coming week in Jerusalem. Have they grasped His proclamation deeply enough or will they desert him?

Personally speaking, I would much rather have had the Evangelist proclaim the eight Beatitudes again at this point instead of these woes! Blessed are the poor, the sorrowing, the merciful, the single-hearted, the peacemakers, those persecuted

because they love largely! They are softer to hear and they captivate our hearts. But of course, they go together: Blessed are you... and also woe to you, for Jesus knows us better than we do ourselves – that we, too, can be tempted toward privilege and lording it over. We have, for the most part, white and educationally privileged lives here in the United States. In our church lives, we also have issues of white privilege, even though as women we are somewhat conditioned by patriarchy.

I'd like to suggest that the message for us today is to open up first, our desires and hearts and minds to what Paul says: that we are "beloved by God" and that we are "in *faith* and in a labor in *love* and steadfastness of *hope* in our Lord Jesus Christ." And then, when we are clearly in the awareness of being loved by God, well maybe we should read again those woes so that nothing is blocking us from that Fulness of Love and so that we can use our wonderful education by committing to action for inclusive justice in this desperate world of ours, where so many people *need* so much from those of us who *have* so much.

That is, after all, the larger meaning of the Law and we are called to stretch it out fully as the greatest of God's gifts to us!