

These are jokes told by the Pope. I saw them on a video. That means if you are a GOOD Catholic you will laugh and think they are the funniest jokes in the world. If you don't laugh, you will go directly to hell. You will not pass GO, and you will NOT collect \$200. (Some of you may have to explain the MONOPOLY reference to the younger folks!) But OK, maybe I'm being a bit harsh. If you don't laugh you will have to go to Rome and apologize to the Pope personally.....The Pope asked: "What's the difference between outlaws – and inlaws?" Outlaws are WANTED! Then the Pope said he could honestly relate to MOTHER-IN-LAW JOKES! He said: "I have a life-long battle with the devil!" And finally, the pope told about a time when he was at the zoo and a man came up to him crying. "What's the matter" the pope asked. He said, "It's my mother-in-law! She fell into the alligator tank." The pope said, "That's horrible – but what do you want me to do about it?" "Pray for those poor alligators!"

OK, you may remember that sometimes the famous movie director Alfred Hitchcock appeared in his movies. Well it turns out, that sometimes the biblical authors appear in their own books! Matthew does this in today's gospel passage. "Every scribe," he writes, "who has been instructed in the kingdom of heaven is like the head of a household who brings from his storeroom both the new and the old." Although scholars do not agree that this gospel writer was actually named Matthew – proper names weren't attached to the gospels until several generations after their composition – scholars DO AGREE that the scribe pictured as bringing out things both new and old is in fact the person who wrote the Gospel of Matthew. So the author provides us with a definition of himself and a description of his ministry. He deals with the old and the new.

Now we need to remember that this Gospel is the only one of the four written for Jewish – that is non-Gentile – Christians. Members of this community could be found in the local synagogue every Sabbath; they religiously circumcised their male children, and probably had never tasted a bacon, lettuce and tomato sandwich! They followed the 'old,' the law of Moses. But they were Jews who also accepted the reforms of Jesus of Nazareth, the 'new.' And it's against this background that we must understand what Matthew is about as a scribe.

First Century Jewish scribes were more than just people who could read and write; they prided themselves on being experts in the 613 laws of Moses, not only making copies of those covenant regulations, but also teaching and commenting on them. Matthew believes he functions in that capacity within his community. Yet, as a follower of the risen Christ, his ministry goes far beyond just those 613 laws; he's also rooted in Jesus' insights about the 'kingdom of heaven' and its implications. That's why he employs the image of someone who can bring both the 'old and the new' from his storeroom. As a Jewish scribe, he's certainly steeped in the old, but he is also committed to proclaiming the new.

So that was a bit of background. Second, Jesus used parables to bring this reality of the old and new about. God's kingdom or the kingdom of heaven refers to God working in our everyday lives. What we could call Jesus' basic 'stump speech' revolved around one thing: God is present right here and right now in everything we do, every person we meet, every situation we face. We don't have to go to church, say the rosary, attend bible study, or even think holy, pious thoughts, good as all of these things are. We can't do anything to make God present. God is everywhere. We are expected to do one major thing. RECOGNIZE that presence. WORK WITH that presence. And our whole world will be different. We'll see with new eyes – GOD'S eyes. And see the world as HE sees it. God sees our world soaked in His grace and bathed in His love –

even in the midst of a pandemic! Which is quite differently than the way our world sees it – or even wants to see it.

Recognizing the presence of God requires change – and that's where repentance comes in. The Greek word used in this context means much more than just being sorry for some evil thing we did and resolving never to do it again. The word METANOIA implies we've experienced a 180 degree change in our value system. What we once thought important we now regard as insignificant, and vice versa. A true metanoia turns our whole life upside down. We become totally new persons. This is why, for instance, early Christians believed all our sins we committed before baptism were completely wiped out in baptism. Those sins were committed by a different person, a person who died in the process of their metanoia, 'sacramentalized' by the dying and rising they experienced in baptism. Only those who changed their value system can actually see God working in their daily lives. That's why the historical Jesus was forced to use parables when He taught; they come at us from the side, surprising us once we 'get it' about their deeper meaning.

Teachers don't use parables when they're simply adding new information to the information a person already has. Parables come into play only when a teacher is trying to change someone's frame of mind, alter how a person processes information, or shift an individual's focus on reality. Parables remind us, 'You can't get there from here!' In other words, "unless you acquire a new values system, nothing I'm saying will make any sense to you." Jesus often used the image of dying and rising as another way of seeing this. Dying to an old view and getting a new one is the only way we can ever follow Him with any authenticity. If we have the same viewpoint today about everything that we had 5 years ago, then we are not being converted. We are not following Christ.

A parable is a trap – it wants us to admit something on one level that we'd never admit on another level. For instance, today's first 2 parables – the treasure in the field and pearl of great price – presume the sky's the limit when we unexpectedly discover something extremely valuable that we actually want. We would all agree: If we really want the treasure or the pearl, we'll 'sell all we have' to acquire it. And we do this all the time! We climb the corporate ladder, sacrificing our families and our health in the process. A high school swimmer is in the pool every morning at 5:30 in order to be a star on the team, a musician spends countless hours practicing in order to get into Julliard. When we really want something, we'll sacrifice just about anything and everything for it. Agreed? And once we've agreed, Jesus springs the trap: Then why aren't we sacrificing all we have to acquire – GOD! To claim THAT treasure or pearl is to recognize something much more valuable than a corner office or winning the championship or getting a spot in a famous school.

Yet it's important to appreciate Jesus' belief that God actually is already present in our daily lives, in the middle of all the good and bad we personally encounter, and in our daily muddling along. That's where His third parable comes in. Just as we can't dictate what kind of fish we pull up in a fishing net, so we cannot dictate the content of any given day. We don't have to create – or be in – an artificial environment for God to be present. No first century Christian would have understood the practice of going off to a monastery to experience a 'holy' environment. Neither would they have celebrated the Lord's Supper in the religious confines of a 'church.' (They didn't even exist yet!) They lived their faith in whatever surroundings God dealt them, not waiting until they were part of an ideal, loving community before they made their move. I've said it before and I'll say it again: If you are looking for the perfect church, St. Andrew's ain't it! You ain't no box of chocolates St. Andrew's! And I ain't no box of chocolates either! But I remind all of us – if we ever actually FIND the perfect church – filled with perfect people and a perfect pastor – would they let us in?! The Church is a dragnet, and somehow all of us got caught by Christ in some way, shape or form or we wouldn't be together

in this moment. And so we muddle through together – stumbling toward the kingdom of God the only way we can – together.

These are the points on which the “scribe....instructed in the kingdom of heaven” dwelt. As a Jewish teacher, he emphasized the traditional faith of the chosen people and opened the door to a new way of looking at that reality. He did more than just relate the well-known salvation history his fellow Israelites had experienced through the centuries; he now zeroed in on how that same salvation was part of his community’s day by day experiences. Just as God had worked in their ancestors’ lives, so God was now working in theirs. This kingdom-trained scribe was constantly bringing the new and the old from his storeroom.

It’s easy for us as Catholics to forget that Jesus’ preaching didn’t revolve around devotion to His mother, the difference between mortal and venial sin, our obligations to keep specific rules and regulations, the issues of abortion and homosexuality, or even the kind of assent we’re expected to give to papal encyclicals. This Capernaum carpenter we follow was simply driven to help us see things others miss, to make certain we have a proper mixture of the old and the new in our lives, and to see God working through it all. (these first 2 points adapted from CELEBRATION, 30 July 2017, p. 1-2)

Third, an application of all of this. We come here on Sundays to be changed – transformed – made into another Christ. It’s a tall order. It’s way more than fulfilling an obligation, punching a heavenly ticket or checking off an ‘I’m religious’ box. The purpose of Jesus’ coming was to help us to be transformed into new persons. The gospels – and hopefully preaching – are supposed to help to facilitate this. The parables function like well placed questions. Both are like a refiner’s fire that burns away the dross and leaves us with no way to hide from the truth. It can be a painfully revealing experience. For example, a conversation with someone we trust who knows us well, or with God in prayer, can go something like this. The conversation starts simply. *What have you been up to?* There are lots of ways to answer that. Then, *What are you currently working on?* That one’s a bit harder, because we know it doesn’t just mean what’s keeping us busy, but rather, *What’s the part of you that’s being tested, what are you learning, what’s not working, and where are you having to grow through your mistakes?* Now we can easily choose to babble on, or get up from our prayer time, trying to prevent the conversation from settling on any single item. *That’s a lot of things*, says the parable – or our conversation partner – or God. *But which one is the one that really matters?*

And then, if we are honest, we realize that we might have to actually deal with the deeper stuff. If we want to live a life of any depth, we can’t avoid these deeper questions, because they make all the difference in just getting through life and actually LIVING LIFE with intention, passion and purpose. And maybe we realize that most of the things we are working on or are occupying our time, really don’t matter all that much. COVID has certainly done that for a lot of us – functioning just like a parable! We may suddenly realize that our lives are awfully full of padding and that the real quality is buried deep inside.

But if we’re honest, and brave, we might actually say “the one that really matters is.....” And we begin to realize that we can do this – we can figure it out with God’s help – and we might even begin to live a life of wisdom, maturity. Maybe the refiner’s fire isn’t so scary. Maybe we’re on a level. But the refiner is never finished. And so another question: *So if this is what really matters – then why aren’t you filling your whole time with being about it?!*

The parables, the real, true friend, God Himself – even a pandemic – can get us to see right through us. They can leave us feeling naked and embarrassed – but inspired and wanting to change too. We’ve just gotten a glimpse of what it’s like to lose the whole world – but gain our own soul. The Kingdom is everything for us.

We just have to realize that – and then allow it to take over our lives. And always knowing that God is with us through all of our faltering attempts. THANK GOD! AMEN. (Adapted from CONNECTIONS, 30 July 2017, p. 4)

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