

13<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – A (July 2, 2023)

“Whoever loves father or mother...son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me”—talk about getting our attention! As usual, Jesus doesn’t beat around the bush in his teaching; in this case, about the nature of genuine discipleship. He is our first love; our first and primary allegiance belongs to him. Of course Jesus also made it clear that we are to love others as well, even those who hate or persecute us. And of course we naturally have a special love and affection for our parents, spouse, children, and others dear to us. Still, Jesus does have the first claim on our love, and rightly so; after all, he is God the Son who became one of us and whose death and resurrection gives us the hope of eternal life.

You know how I sometimes mention a particular saint or other Christian hero as an example of genuine discipleship. Jesus’ challenge in this gospel to give him our first love reminds me of one of my favorite saints—St. Thomas More who lived 500 years ago in England and whose feast the Church observed a week ago Thursday (June 22). He grew up in a wealthy family and received an excellent education. He became a lawyer and also served in Parliament and in other public offices under King Henry VIII and was highly respected as a man of great honesty and integrity. In fact, he is the patron saint of lawyers and politicians; and if there are any two professions in desperate need of a patron saint, it is certainly lawyers and politicians.....

It is in Thomas More’s connection with King Henry that his story takes on a sharper edge and that tested his commitment to Christ and to his Catholic faith. The story gets complicated and can sound like a soap opera, but the bottom line is this: the king wanted to divorce his first wife (Catherine) so he could marry another. Henry sought an annulment from that marriage, and he asked More to sign a letter to the pope supporting his request for that annulment—but More refused to do so. Henry’s request was denied, and so he began to assert his own control and authority over the Church. Thomas More, whose conscience would not allow him to support the king’s actions, resigned from public office. Still, Henry was not satisfied; he ordered More to take an oath publicly declaring the king to be the supreme head of the Church in England. More, again as a matter of conscience, refused to take that oath. This led to his imprisonment in the Tower of London for over a year. In the end, he was charged and convicted of treason and was put to death by beheading on July 6, 1535. By the way, the story of Thomas More is portrayed in one of the best movies ever made—“A Man For All Seasons” released in 1966; I can’t recommend it highly enough.

Besides all this, Thomas More was also a family man—and here is where today’s gospel has a special relevance. Recall those strong and even head-scratching words of Jesus: “whoever loves father or mother...son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.” Thomas More had four children with his first wife; after her death, he remarried. He loved his children deeply, strongly encouraged their formal education, and often wrote letters to them while he was away at work. As the king’s actions against More intensified, and especially during his imprisonment for more than a year, we can readily imagine the growing concern and fear that his family experienced in his regard. We can also imagine that Thomas himself may have been afraid of what might happen to him—and maybe even feeling tempted to agree to Henry’s demands in order to save his life and to be able to return to his home and family.

But Thomas More knew where his first love and his first loyalty lay: with his Savior and with the faith which is founded on Jesus and which is proclaimed by the Church he founded on the rock of St. Peter. In a letter he wrote to his daughter Margaret while in prison, he said:

“Although I know well, Margaret, that because of my past wickedness I deserve to be abandoned by God, I cannot but trust in his merciful goodness...I will not mistrust him, Meg, though I shall feel myself weakening and on the verge of being overcome with fear...And therefore, my own good daughter, do not let your mind be troubled over anything that shall happen to me in this world. Nothing can come but what God wills. And I am very sure that whatever that be, however bad it may seem, it shall indeed be the best.”

Did Thomas More experience fear? Of course he did. Did he love his wife and family, and did he want to be reunited with them? Of course he did. But he also knew to whom he was ultimately and finally answerable and responsible—to the God who created him and redeemed him by the saving Passion of Jesus Christ and by his resurrection. As he mounted the scaffold on which he would be put to death, More in his final words said that he was “the king’s good servant, but God’s first.” He was indeed; he got it right, and he had his priorities straight. By the grace of God and by the intercession of St. Thomas More and all the saints, may we all be the good servants of all those we are called to serve...but may we be God’s faithful servants first.