

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on Quinquagesima
February 11, 2018

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In last Sunday's Gospel we saw Our Lord Jesus hoping to spend quiet time in the house of Simon Peter. But it didn't happen! The Lord was deluged with requests for healing. You remember that as soon as the Sabbath was over at sundown, and people could travel, they came to Him in great numbers. It may be an exaggeration to say "The whole city was gathered at the door," but we get the idea. Jesus must have been busy healing and exorcising to a very late hour, and on a day He had planned some down time.

Then in the middle of the night Jesus went out to a deserted place to pray. In the morning, when the disciples found Him, He declared in effect "Let's get out of here!" The Lord said it more elegantly. "I must preach in other towns and synagogues *for that is why I came out.*"

In these remarkable verses we see God's Own Son wrestling with the priority of the *urgent* versus the *important*. Jesus had an awareness, perhaps a *growing* awareness, that being about the Father's business meant preaching and teaching and ultimately having it all lead to the Cross. Yet He was also aware, and now *everybody else was too*, that He had God's Own power to heal. That presented a problem. Our Lord's popularity as a healer was in danger of spoiling His entire plan for a preaching tour of towns and synagogues. Jesus knew the crowds would come looking specifically for miracles instead of teaching.

That situation sets up today's Gospel passage. After having gone out early to pray in communion with His Father, Jesus reaffirmed His preaching mission: "*For that is why I came out.*" But it wasn't long before this leper came to Christ for healing. And Jesus knew full well what would happen after that. Soon as he got out the door, instead of going quietly and discreetly to the priest to perform the proper Levitical rites, this man would go up and down the town announcing what Jesus had done for him. Which is exactly what he did. Now, you and I are to do that also: give testimony about what Jesus has done for us. But as a result here, peoples' minds were so full of miracles there was no room for them to hear God's Own Son reveal the glories of the Kingdom of Heaven.

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The good news is that the compassionate God sets aside His Own better plans for our sake. He gives up the *important* for the *urgent*. And that should not surprise us. Almighty God had been doing that all along! Time and again the Lord accepted Moses' pleas for the stiff-necked and rebellious Hebrews in the wilderness. When the people pestered the Judges for a king, Samuel was instructed by the Lord to give them one. In today's Gospel the same thing is seen happening. God Incarnate relented and changed His plans because of His care for the people. We see the Son acting very much like the Father.

Jesus was willing, if and when necessary, to give up the *important* for the *urgent*. Things are not so different today. Our Lord's priorities were a Divine mission. That is still the Church's mission. Yet the Lord's heart could always be moved. The Church sees herself as the sacrament of the unity of all people. That is why the Church is in the forefront of advocacy for human rights and relief of suffering worldwide, regardless of race or creed. The secular world makes that work increasingly difficult and even *fights* it. The Church has her priorities, but her heart can always be moved. How can it be otherwise when we have the Sacred Heart as our Lord?

When the leper pleaded "If you will, you can make me clean" Jesus performed the cure. But His decision to heal affected the outcome of the whole preaching tour. Scripture tells us from then on Christ had to remain in the countryside. Compassion took over. But as a consequence, hundreds, perhaps thousands, of souls would never hear the Son of God preach in their cities. People today would still rather be relieved of discomfort or entertained than be taught to place their lives under the authority of God's sovereign law. They need that law. They need to *follow* that law. But the decision was still made. Sometimes we must give up the *important* for the *urgent*.

It is a wonderful thing we have this particular remembrance of Our Lord Jesus. In it we see Him wrestle with the problem of what to do. His followers certainly have to wrestle with similar problems of urgency. We are glad that the Son of God came down on the side of compassion. We are also glad when His Church does the same, even at the momentary cost of some other things, or at the risk of confusion. But

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unlike the healed leper, the Lord's disciples today also follow Jesus' commands *after* we have received His mercy. And we are to follow His *other* example as well, resorting to prayer often, in order to seek the Father's will in all things.