

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on Quinquagesima Sunday
March 3, 2019

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Today's gospel is a portion of Our Lord's Sermon on the Plain as recorded in St Luke's Gospel. You can get Bible scholars into a royal cat fight over the question of the whether this is a *separate* sermon from what is recorded by St Matthew as the Sermon on the Mount, (which is, after all, four times greater in length.) Saint Augustine was of the opinion each evangelist (Matthew and Luke) took the inaugural sermon of Our Lord Jesus and edited it for the purpose of his own gospel account. Matthew's gospel aimed at a primarily Jewish audience and Luke declared his intention was to put the Christian records in order.

Whether the Sermon on the Mount or the Sermon on the Plain, this is not the Gospel. It is the official statement of the *need* of the Gospel. The Gospel is Jesus Christ Himself and how He came and what He did to save us and enable us to reach the type of character He says God want in us. The Lord bids us look back at our vocation from eternity. Long ago Jeremiah had recalled the Lord saying "Before you were born I knew you." (1:5) In His great sermon Our Blessed Lord reminds us each soul existed as a perfect thought in the mind of God. In the end we must realize this thought perfectly in concrete ways, and for that goal we must strive. None of this is impossible. The Son of God says we can get there.

Among our Lord's frequent sayings are those about the blind leading the blind and that a disciple is not above his master. Before we can judge others we must judge ourselves. Otherwise we will all wind up in the pit. A teacher who is blind and uninstructed will be a barrier to his student from getting nearer to the truth. You cannot teach what you do not have, and if the teacher has faults it is likely his student will copy them.

The good instructor is often required to teach the so-called entry-level courses, hoping he will occasionally find a student who is actually interested in his field of study and in whom the teacher can light a spark so that the student will go further. I am reminded of the program notes in Chicago years ago for a concert by the Russian pianist Sviatoslav Richter. In them the renowned music teacher Heinrich Neuhaus was quoted as saying he could teach Richter nothing more. The brilliant pianist already had the technique and now had to use what had been given as a launching pad into further interpretive skills. And of course he did that.

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In the gospel Our Lord says every student when he has finished the course may be on a par with his teacher. But he won't *excel* his teacher. This was a favorite saying of the Lord and is found in various contexts in Luke 22, John 13, and Matthew 10. Of course the Lord is not primarily concerned with the student-teacher relationship but about you and me and our ability to be His disciples. Self-knowledge and reform, periodic self-examination made against the template of Christ's gospel, and leading to confession, amendment of life, and the fruitfulness of absolution, are necessary ingredients if we will be of help to Christ's Church in proclaiming the gospel good news to others. Otherwise we are in danger of being what Christ described in this passage: "the halt leading the blind."

We have a phrase for that. "The pot calling the kettle black." Hypocrisy is in the unreformed Christian pretending to be so pained by the speck in his brother's eye that he is compelled to remove it. And this, all the while he is hiding, or perhaps even ignorant of, the beam in his own eye. Only when self-reformation is going on can a disciple see charitably how to reform others. Bishop Marshall used to say "When they come to you they want to know you have come from prayer and are going back to prayer. *And they'll sniff it.*"

The faithful disciple does indeed strive to make his brother better, lighting that spark so that the new disciple will go further. He does it by his example, and he begins the work of improving others by setting his own house in order. Only the good can do good.