

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on Quinquagesima Sunday
February 14, 2021

+

If you ever had best-laid plans come to nothing because of “circumstances beyond your control” today’s Gospel incident is for you. (Some of you remember the early days of television when a PLEASE STAND BY sign would come on your 14 or 17- inch black and white screen with the notice: “due to circumstances beyond our control.”) Today we get to observe God’s Own Son wrestling with the question of the urgent versus the important. We read every day during the pandemic about difficult choices being made about who gets treatment; who gets the vaccine. Our Lord Jesus knew that being about the Father’s business meant preaching and teaching, and ultimately having it all lead to the Cross. Yet Jesus was also aware He had God’s Own power to heal. *And now everybody else knew it too!* 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.

Jesus reaffirmed His preaching mission. He said: “For that is why I came out.” But it wasn’t too long before this leper came to Him seeking healing. The healing was no problem. But the Lord knew what this man was going to do when he was healed. Full of the joy he was now free from leprosy, this man announced to one and all that *Jesus did it!* As a result, peoples’ minds were so full of miracles there was no room in them for hearing God’s Own Son reveal the glories of the Kingdom of Heaven. It was a case of “circumstances beyond our control.”

So a choice had to be made. And *The Compassionate God took over.* He set aside His Own better plan for our sake. He gave up the important for the urgent. That is something Almighty God had done repeatedly in salvation history. The Lord accepted the pleas of Moses for the “stiff-necked and rebellious” Hebrews in the wilderness. When the people pestered the judges for a king, Samuel consulted the Lord and gave them Saul for their king. King David unilaterally decided God needed a temple. And in all these cases the end result was worse than the beginning. But in all these cases, as in today’s Gospel, Almighty God relented, changed His plans, because of His care for the people. *Like Father, like Son!*

Jesus was willing, and so must be His followers, if and when necessary, to shelve the important for the urgent. Things are not different today. Our Lord had His

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on Quinquagesima Sunday
February 14, 2021

+

priorities. It was a *Divine* mission. And that is the Church's mission. Yet the Lord's heart could always be moved. And therefore as the sacrament of the unity of all people, the Church is in the forefront of advocacy for human rights and relief of suffering worldwide. That is why we have always been in the business of operating hospitals, shelters for the homeless and mothers with unwanted pregnancies, food banks, schools, and orphanages. (Just now the archdiocesan Planning Office for Urban Affairs is observing its 50th anniversary advocating low-income housing. Housing is a matter of social justice.) Mayor Ed Koch of New York City was Jewish. But he could tell you the social service agencies of the Catholic Church were the glue that kept his city together. Yes, the Church has the Gospel to proclaim. But her heart can always be moved. How can it be otherwise?

When the leper pleaded: "If you will, you can make me clean." Jesus set aside His Own agenda. The decision to heal affected the outcome of the whole preaching tour. Scripture says that from then on the Lord had to remain in the countryside. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of people would never hear the Son of God preach about the Kingdom of Heaven as a result of that decision. And 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. These things are regrettable. But we are privileged to have this incident about Our Lord Jesus, and to see Him wrestle with the problem of what to do. We are glad the Son of God came down on the side of compassion. We are glad when His Church does this too, even at the momentary cost of some other plans.

Unlike the healed leper, however, after we have received mercy, we are to *follow* Jesus' commands. And we are to resort to prayer often, as Jesus did, in order to seek the Father's will in all things.