

“LORD, IF YOU WISH, YOU CAN MAKE ME CLEAN” (Matt 8:2)

Homily of His Eminence, Peter Ebere Cardinal Okpaleke at Resurrection Parish, Riverview, Florida on June 30, 2023 for the Bible Class Last Day Celebration

I am happy to be in your midst and to celebrate the Eucharist with you. I thank Bishop Gregory Parkes for receiving me warmly and your pastor, Fr. Dan, for inviting me to share the Eucharist with you. I greet all the priests working in your parish – Frs George, Augustine Eugene and Aloysius. As you know, the Eucharist is the centre of our faith. Christ, the Word of God, took flesh in the Blessed Virgin Mary and was made man. To sum up his mission on earth, Christ gave us himself in the Eucharist. In the Eucharist, he remains with us and with his Church forever. May we never grow tired of thanking the Lord for this great gift.

I was informed that we are marking the Bible Class Last Day celebration. The Bible is the Word of God. And there is an intimate connection between the Word of God and the Eucharist. Jesus Christ is the link between both. Jesus Christ is the Word made flesh. God is love and God created the world through His Word. This Word, at the fullness of time, took flesh in Jesus Christ. The Scriptures – both the Old and the New – are about him. The Old Testament documents the story of God’s covenant with the Israelites. This covenant was in view of the New Covenant in Jesus Christ. In this New Covenant, the divine-human relationship becomes more intimate. Indeed, it is so intimate that God not only took flesh, becoming like us in everything but sin, but also, God gives us Himself in the Eucharist, as bread. Remember, we become what we eat.

From the point of view of biology, whatever food we eat – bread, cheese, steak, fish, etc, - is assimilated by our bodies. Food nourishes, strengthens, and energizes us. Similarly, God has given us the Eucharist, the Word of God made flesh, to nourish, strengthen and transform us into true images of God. So, I congratulate all of you who participated in the Bible class and encourage you to see the deep link between the Bible and the Eucharist and allow yourselves to be nourished and transformed by both. It is because of this inner link that at every celebration of the Eucharist, we are fed first at the table of the Word and then at the table of the Eucharist. And if you remember the story of the two disciples on the way to Emmaus, Jesus explained to them the Scriptures while on the journey. But it was only at the breaking of bread that they recognized him and recalled that their hearts were burning while he was explaining to them the Scriptures. My prayer is that we develop a hunger for the Word of God so that we may grow in our appreciation of the mystery of God’s love and nearness to us.

Today in the readings, both the leper and Abraham model for us how to relate with God. They also teach us the basic disposition to cultivate in our prayers.

In making his request, the leper said: “Lord, **if you wish**, you can make me clean.” I want us to focus on the phrase: “if you wish!”

This statement is indicative of someone who did not feel entitled to Jesus’ miracle. He did not feel that Jesus is under an obligation to heal him. Yet, he was not in doubt whether Jesus could heal him. On the contrary, he was confident that Jesus could heal him if he so desired.

What is amazing about this leper is his attitude to his illness and to the Lord. In the time of Jesus, lepers suffered greatly. They were excluded from the society and regarded as unclean. They were required by law to ring a bell and announce their presence so that people would more effectively avoid them. Leprosy was also accompanied by physical pain and deformity. It eats up the toes and fingers of those who suffer from it. Sometimes, their faces are disfigured as the disease eats up the nose and other parts of the body. Lepers, therefore, had it very rough and tough. This notwithstanding, the man did not sound desperate or bitter about his circumstance. He was rather respectful. He was confident in Jesus’ ability to heal him, yet open to accepting whatever Jesus might decide to do, even if, not to heal him.

Entitlement is one of the silent dis-eases of our time. Those caught up in it feel that other people – parents, friends, relatives, and even God – owe it to them to take care of their needs. Other people are duty-bound to run to their aid and be at their beck and call. When they feel that there is a delay in doing this, they sulk, whine, throw tantrums or get downright angry and nasty. Such people feel that the world should be a bed of roses where they get whatever they want, whenever they want it and however they want it. Unfortunately, that is not the way the world is. We must put up with obstacles. God loves us but allows some difficulties to befall us. In the same way, our parents love us very much but, they are supposed to let us face problems and challenges because they are for our good. Exposure to problems and challenges helps one to grow and mature in the way one thinks and sees life. By facing challenges, one is made aware of one’s strengths and weaknesses; one learns the difficulties other people go through to offer us a helping hand. One grows in gratitude. Those who feel entitled are often selfish and ungrateful. They respond with anger and disrespect in the face of difficulties and challenges. But the leper, despite his difficult circumstance, came to Jesus and respectfully prayed: “Lord, if you wish, you can make me clean.”

It is a mystery why God, although almighty, allows suffering or any form of lack to exist on earth. Why did God allow the man to become a leper? Why did God not give Abraham and Sarah a son? Or why did God wait till Abraham and Sarah become very old before fulfilling his promise of giving them a son? We may not

know the reason. But, in faith we know that whatever God allows to happen to us, could be for our good. Still in faith, we know that God made human beings in God's image and likeness. Like God, human beings are creative. God wants us to use our ingenuity to make the world better. God wants us to help in making the world a better place through our love and labour. God wants to bless other people through you. God wants to make the world of someone better through you.

Jesus responded positively to the leper's humble and respectful request. Of course, I want to; be healed! The leper got healed instantly. We may not have the power to bring instant healing in people's lives. But Jesus wants you to be a channel of his healing touch to others. Like Jesus, let us be attentive to the pains of others around us and spare some moments to reach out, at least in prayer to such. As we do this, may the love of God we encounter in the Bible and celebrate in the Eucharist, flow out in our lives for the betterment of the world – Amen.

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