

HOMILY SUNDAY 33 – C* (Homily 02)
“Beginning Well Leads to Ending Well”

The niece of one of our staff called him recently, all excited. She was quite sure that by studying the Book of Revelation, she had figured out when the end of the world was going to happen. No amount of listening, dissuading and caution on his part could dampen her fervor. She had a cause and she was going to tell the world.

There is a curious desire on the part of many to know and predict the events of the future. That seems to take the edge off the unknown and give them an illusion of control to life. It is easy for that focus to become part of what we traditionally know in the Church as the *Last Things* – death, purgatory, hell and heaven or eternal life, especially as we near the end of the liturgical year.

The gospel today is about letting go of that preoccupation and focusing instead on the intermediate steps along the way, helping the new way of life Jesus brought break into the present – the way of forgiveness, not fight nor flight.

In fact, one spiritual writer, Richard Rohr, would take us beyond the intermediate steps to the first steps. He claims that we have it backwards. Our focus should be on the correct beginning of the spiritual journey, not on the end of it. Here is what he has to say about the matter of living well and dying well, taken from his recent book, *Adams Return*.

“Some kind of baptism (read: “initiation”) is needed to start the path to spiritual maturity. Fire, water, blood, failure or holy desire may all be precipitating events, but without a fall or a major dunking into the central mystery, a person has no chance of swimming in the right ocean. It is the necessary journey from the false self to the True Self. Without such a great defeat, we will misinterpret almost all religious words and rituals from our small ego position. We will use God instead of love God. Religion does not work at all unless there has been an encounter, especially a “close encounter of the first kind.” We fall into an unnamable love and a new freedom that many call God.”

He continues thus, “Primal cultures did not generically focus on the end of life or on last things. Fear of death, judgment, later reward and punishment play very little part in their ways of thinking (unlike Christianity). Initiated and initiating cultures focused on getting the beginning right (thus the word initiation), and then they trusted that the end would take care of itself. *First things* instead of last things were

their concern, and this focus makes all the difference in the world because it allows us to live in the present. It connected ordinary time to eternal time, uniting heaven and earth, rather than casting them as opposites, enemies, or one as a mere obstacle course for the other. I am afraid that moderns are utterly schizophrenic about the two worlds most of the time, except when we really love, really pray or really stand naked in nature.

There is deep wisdom here that begs for our deeper attention. Living well leads to ending well. Loving deeply leads to freedom from fear, as stated in 1 John. Or as St. Augustine put it, love and do what you will. All these statements resonate with what Rohr is claiming – it is all in how we begin the spiritual journey.

All ancient rites of initiation involved some suffering and some shedding of blood. That is not far from the teaching of Jesus that anyone who would be a disciple of his must take up his or her cross and follow him. We follow him to the Cross, uniquely tailored to fit our life situation. That was the meaning of Jesus' baptism in the Jordan, where he took on our sinful humanity. That is also the deep meaning of our own baptism – the acceptance of suffering and even shedding of blood for the sake of the Gospel.

This will entail suffering, as Jesus challenged all the existing laws and structures except that of love. The system that killed Jesus will also attack the disciples of Jesus who will share in his suffering. The suffering of the person who chooses to forgive instead of hold resentments is a prime example of the fate of the truly initiated person, a true disciple of Jesus.

Giving meaning to suffering will enable the disciple to go through the difficult time of transition from one way of thinking and acting to the new way of thinking and acting that Jesus brought about.

In 2007, a member of the Catholic board on the Residential School Settlement agreement was invited to speak in Calgary at a Truth and Reconciliation conference. He happened to include the word *forgiveness* in his comments. He was no sooner finished talking when he was affronted by an angry psychologist who upbraided him for using the word *forgiveness*. She categorically told him that that word did not belong in the conference; that he should never had used that word, and that he only used it because he was a Christian.

When he replied that according to his experience unless people at least move towards forgiveness, they will be angry for the rest of their lives, she retorted that it

was okay to be angry as long as it did not control a person. Sadly he realized that she really did not believe in forgiveness at all. She may be an example of where much of the modern world is at and the challenge we face in helping that world understand the Paschal Mystery where suffering and forgiveness lead to new and eternal life.

The Eucharist that we celebrate today is not just a foretaste of the heavenly banquet that awaits us in eternity. It takes us back to the beginnings of the Church; to the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan; to the Last Supper, to the Passion of Christ; to his death on the Cross – all leading to his resurrection and the giving of the Spirit.

May our celebration today help us to renew our baptismal commitment as an initiation into the mystery of the Son of God among us, giving us eternal life even now and empowering us to suffer and love selflessly as we look forward to the fullness of eternal life.