

## St. Matthew's Retreat - Homily

I am very grateful to Father Chris and the members of the Liturgy Committee for inviting me to conduct this mini Lenten retreat here at St. Matthew's. In the pre-Vatican II Liturgy, the 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent was known as Passion Sunday, and I think Father Chris asked me to come today because listening to me will be part of your Passion this lent.

This morning I would like to describe some of the stark realities we experience in our earthly journey and reflect upon how the Easter story, which concludes our Lenten journey gives purpose and meaning to our life here and now and prepares us for that new and greater life with God in the eternal kingdom to which each of us is called. In today's Gospel, we hear a troubled Jesus knowing of his forthcoming death and how he would die asking, What should I say? Father save me from this hour? ... We might describe this agonizing question of Jesus as a groan.

This reminds me of an observation that Father Brian Massengale made about the problems of our day which I think fits in with your parish Lenten theme, "We Thirst for You O Lord". He quoted from the Book of Exodus 3:7, where the Lord said, "I have heard the groans of my people"

Father Massengale points out that a "groan," is different from a complaint or gripe. By definition a groan is inarticulate. It is a cry of deep distress or pain that does not always reveal its source or cause. Groans, the inarticulate cries of people's distress, are the indisputable sounds which announce "all is not well! Something is terribly wrong! This is not how God wants things to be!"

In many respects, how terrible it has been during this 21<sup>st</sup> Century. There were the attacks on the Twin Towers in New York City, the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. and the downed flight in Pennsylvania on 9/11, killing nearly 3,000 and wounding hundreds of others. There was the bombshell revelation by the Boston Globe in 2002 about the scandal of clergy sexual abuse of children and its cover-ups locally, nationally and internationally as well as the revelations of the pain endured by abuse victims and their families. Then, there have been the wars in Iraq and for over 16 years in Afghanistan. The collapse of Wall Street in 2008 and the financial disasters it has created for individuals, families, employment and the housing market.

We endured the terrorist attacks by ISIS in Paris, Brussels, Barcelona and London and their imitators at a night club in Orlando and a concert in Las Vegas last month – a pedestrian bike path in New York City, the Sunday's massacre in a small Texas church, and a bombing at a school in Parkland, Florida, killing 17 and wounding 14, just to mention a few of the challenges we have faced nationally in the past 17 plus years.

Certainly, our problems are not all behind us. There is still pain and stress in our midst; groans that indicate "all is not well."

There are the groans among priests and religious. They are being stretched thin to the point of breaking, as the priesthood and religious life are on the brink of demographic collapse. One doesn't have to be an MBA in accounting to understand that for the foreseeable future priests and vowed religious will become older, grayer and fewer.

For many priests and religious there is the temptation to hunker down and wait for retirement; for younger priests there is the worry: how many will be in active ministry ten years from now? What will the church and the priesthood look like then? And what will it mean for me? There is among many priests a pervasive sense of frustration with church leadership in general and with bishops in particular.

There are a variety of causes for this frustration: a feeling of having been "sold out in Dallas"; fear of unjust accusations and an anxiety about due process; anger because of an institutional unwillingness to even discuss alternative ways of dealing with the priest and religious shortage; dismay at having to implement liturgical and doctrinal practices that conflict with their pastoral experience and the lament at the way in which authority is expected to be exercised in the church – more as a passive docility rather than mature collaboration with ecclesiastical authorities stemming from a common love and concern for Christ and His church. There are also the groans of priests and religious about the declining Mass attendance, the question about the Catholic identity of our colleges, schools or faith formation programs and the plethora of expectations emanating from national and diocesan offices, which at times may seem overwhelming or totally irrelevant to pastoral needs and realities.

Then, of course, there are the groans of the laity searching for the relevance of faith in a world of militarism, and consumerism; for greater transparency and accountability in the conduct of the church's life; for greater participation in decision-making roles; for fuller recognition of the gifts and insights that women have to offer; for prophetic voices which speak to the evils of the day and that respond to the deepest spiritual hunger of the human heart and, in many cases, for the sense of simplicity and certitude in matters of faith and morals that seemed to have characterized the church of not too long ago.

There are also the groans of the laity about the direction of our society. 79 percent of Americans indicated dissatisfaction with our government in a recent Wall Street Journal/NBC poll.

The new jobs don't feel as sturdy as the old ones. It takes more hours to make the same money or to support, the same lifestyle. College students are amassing huge debt. Upward mobility increasingly seems a mirage, a myth. And this groaning isn't just about the economy. It's about fear, it's about impotence. We can't calm the world in the way we'd like to, can't find common ground and peace at home, can't pass needed laws, can't build necessary infrastructure, can't, can't can't.

Father Massengale suggests there are two dangers or temptations that arise in such times. The first is that of nostalgia, which is basically a state of denial. The attitude of nostalgia ignores the loss that has happened or is

happening, and, with increasing desperation, attempts to cling to a way of life and faith which are no more.

The second danger or temptation is despair, a stance which concludes that faith is no longer possible in the new situation; that all is lost; that no future possibilities are to be found. This despair inevitably leads to apathy, resignation and spiritual death.

In the face of this desperate denial and fatalistic despair we must fashion a new future, one that is neither a simple rearrangement of the furniture nor a continuation of former ways in different configurations.

The critical question, then, is, "what is the new paradigm?" Father Massengale offers the image of hospice. While Father Massengale's image of hospice has certain merits, he acknowledges that some will resist or reject the image of a hospice care worker as the paradigm for today's church. While many other images could be suggested, I prefer the one offered by Father Stephen Rosetti of the Catholic University of America: the image of the resurrection vision.

In this image, all of life – every facet of it – must be viewed through the lens of the Resurrection. The Resurrection moment in history is the moment: it is unparalleled and must remain the defining event for humanity and for all of history. All of life and history revolve around this one moment: it penetrates every atom with life and gives every moment its meaning.

The Resurrection vision doesn't yield to denial or despair but gives rise to a natural Christian optimism; not a Pollyannaish optimism that fails to recognize the serious problems and inevitable traumas we face, but one which appreciates that these challenging life realities are far surpassed by the blazing glory of the Resurrection.

Indeed, with the Resurrection vision, no amount of change or challenge can ever dislodge our confidence. Rather these changes and challenges are welcomed as manifestations of our dynamic, unfolding God who is ever new, ever more wonderful but who never changes. With the Resurrection vision we can live in the maelstrom of change without losing our way. In fact we can become the leaders and managers of change and ride the crest of change as it moves all creation to its fullness and to its final transfiguration in Christ Jesus.

May this then, be our vision and our hope. And during this mini retreat I would like to speak about some practical consequences which flow to as disciples of Jesus which this Resurrection vision evokes.

Specifically, I will speak about two roles, our call to be evangelists and our need to give flesh and blood to the social teaching of the Church.