

“Measuring Up”

September 3, 2017, 4 pm & St. Ann
Fr. Jim Plough

Imagine that I'm holding a yardstick, a standard of measurement first used by English sovereigns. A yard was said to be the breadth of the chest of the Saxon race. When I was growing up, a yardstick was sometimes also a measure of discipline, a paddle used by a teacher upon recalcitrant students. At that time, it was called a ruler, measuring a foot instead of a yard, none the less an effective board of education. A different standard of measurement is the metric system, with its origin in revolutionary France. Meters instead of inches, feet, and yards. Officially, a yard is nine-tenths of a meter, or more precisely .9144 meters. France would not imitate England, nor England France.

There are other variant standards of measurement. For temperature, one follows either Fahrenheit or centigrade. For time one follows the Julian or the Gregorian calendar. The first goes back to a Roman emperor, the second to Pope Gregory XIII. In Gregory's time (1582), westerners came to realize that the older Julian calendar had been erroneous, by then off by ten days (too many leap years in the Julian calendar). Because it was introduced by the pope, some countries refused to make the change. Historians have had to grapple with old date, new date calendar reckonings ever since. By the new calendar, the Russian Revolution of the twentieth century took place in October, 1917; by Russian standards it is called the November Revolution. Today's world has finally come over to the Gregorian standard.

Then we come to divergent moral standards. How is one to measure human behavior? Utilitarians say whatever is useful is good; pragmatists say whatever works is good; by the pleasure principle, whatever feels good is good. We have finally come to the heart of today's homily: how do we measure human conduct?

By the commandments, of course, or the beatitudes. In today's second reading, St. Paul says “Do not conform yourselves to this age (Romans 12: 1-2). Do not follow the standards of this age. “Be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you

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may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect.” For St. Paul, what God has done through his son is the standard for us to imitate. Jesus laid down his life for us; we are to do the same for one another. “I urge you, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship.”

I believe that the transformation of which St. Paul speaks, the standard for our moral conduct, takes place in the Liturgy. Our mind is transformed by hearing the word of God and offering ourselves to God in union with Christ’s sufferings (presenting our bodies as a living sacrifice).

Renewal for Paul also stands for what happens in Baptism: we become a new creation; we come to have a new vision. The old age is disappearing, the new age is at hand. The renewal which begins in conversion and baptism proceeds with each new decision, each new Liturgy in which we measure our responsibilities by what we see God to have done in Christ, how his mercies have been revealed to us through the sacrifice of Jesus on our behalf. The experience of Liturgy becomes the measure of our conduct, our standard.

Why do we celebrate Liturgy each week? Not because the law requires it, but because Liturgy is the measure of life, the yardstick for assessing our responsibilities. Liturgy provides the standard for our moral decisions. Remove Liturgy and you remove the standard for our behavior as Christians. Do not conform yourselves to this age! Be transformed by the renewal of your mind, so that you may judge what is God’s will, what is good, pleasing and perfect.

What a powerful standard we have in the question posed by Jesus in today’s gospel! “What profit would there be for one to gain the whole world and forfeit his life (Matthew 16: 21-27)?” Profit is the yardstick this world holds out to us. Being successful is all that matters. Whatever is successful is good.

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God forbid, Lord, that you should not succeed! Peter was judging by the yardstick of success. Lord, never let misfortune, suffering, and death be your fate. How ironic! Last Sunday Jesus praised Peter for his profession of faith. Today Jesus upbraids him for judging by human standards and not by God's! From Peter as rock to Peter as a stumbling stone.

Today's message is that Christian ethics flow from worship. Liturgy gives us a measure of our conduct. We do not simply look up the rules in a book. We look at the Gospel, reflect upon what God has done for us in Christ, and then assess our every decision in the light of that Word and that transforming sacrifice. That is how we are transformed by the renewal of our mind. Then we can judge what is God's will, what is good, pleasing, perfect.

We are accustomed to regarding Eucharist as receiving the Body of Christ. It is that, indeed, but receiving is only the first part of that reality. Eucharist also entails being called, summoned, to become Eucharist for others. Such is the yardstick by which we can measure the quality of our lives as Christians.