

“With Me in Paradise”

Homily for the Funeral Mass of Fr. Tom Kuykendall, Pastor of St. Joseph Catholic Church,
Wenatchee, Washington

Luke 23:32-43

Most Reverend Joseph J. Tyson, Bishop of Yakima

Peace be with you! “This day you will be with me in paradise.” These are the words spoken by Jesus to the “Good Thief”. Why on this occasion of Fr. Tom Kuykendall’s funeral Mass are we hearing about a good thief? As Fr. Tom’s good friend, Fr. Richard Keolker explained, this passage was one of Fr. Tom’s favorites because it grasps the unusual nature of God’s grace.

Indeed, as Fr. Richard noted in English, in reviewing his life, Fr. Tom often felt like the thief sneaking into a paradise at the last possible moment principally because he came to priesthood late in life. Those of us here in the Spanish speaking community and folks like me having returned to the Diocese of Yakima have always known Fr. Tom as a priest. But Fr. Tom started out as a Jesuit novice and seminarian. He left the Jesuits while still a seminarian and was never ordained a priest with them. He returned to the regular every day life of an ordinary Christian. He taught for nearly two decades at Eisenhower High School in Yakima while taking care of a chronically ill mother. He was involved the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults bringing many into the Church as a lay catechist and sponsor. After his mother’s death he felt the old call to priesthood stir again in his heart. It was the recently deceased Francis Cardinal George, who, as bishop of Yakima, welcomed him back into seminary formation and ordained him a priest. Thus coming to priesthood late in life he felt himself like that “good thief” stealing grace at the end of the road.

Of course, you and I know the rest of the story. His last minute “entry” into the grace of priesthood was a full and productive twenty years culminating in the construction of a beautiful parish campus next to the school as well as stepping in as the superintendent of Catholic schools.

How could he come to this kind of grace? The great fifth century saint, Maximus of Turin notes, “The thief honors the one who suffers.” Those few words summarize Fr. Tom’s approach to his entire life – his ministry as a lay catechist as well as his ministry as a priest. He honored those who suffered. He honored those who suffered spiritual poverty and desired to bring God into their lives. He honored the spiritually homeless bringing them into communion with the Church. He honored the physically and mentally impoverished through his unflagging support of Catholic Charities here in the Wenatchee Valley. He honored those suffering a lack of welcome thus opening the doors to the development and growth of our robust and active Spanish language ministry.

So if any of us wonder about our worthiness to be at the Lord’s banquet, wonder about the repetitiveness of sin in our life, wonder about our capacity to make our way from earth to heaven we need not look any farther for hope than in the words of the “Good Thief” who not only showed Fr. Tom the way to paradise but shows us the way too. May we allow the words of Jesus to the “Good Thief” sink into our hearts as a source of hope amidst our sadness: “This day you will be with me in paradise!”