

Mass of Christian Burial Homily for Father Ron Patnode

Isaiah (58: 6 - 11); Psalm 116; Hebrews 6: 10-12; John 13:1, 3-5, 16-17.

Most Reverend Joseph J. Tyson, Bishop of Yakima

Peace be with you! I consider it a happy set of bookends that Father Patnode died on the Feast of Christ the King and that – today – we bury him on the Feast of St. Francis Xavier. I'd like to think that they were his final liturgical gift to all of us since both feasts speak to the way liturgy leads to mission.

So let me begin with that Feast of Christ the King. You might recall that on the Feast of Christ the King we always read about the unveiling of Christ the King with a Gospel from one of the passion narratives from either Matthew, Mark or Luke – depending on which liturgical cycle our Sunday Gospels are taking – precisely because the Church wants to remind us of the unusual “kingship” of Jesus Christ – a kingship revealed as “powerful” precisely at the most “powerless” point of Jesus’ earthy life: his nailing to the cross.

I first came to know the depth of this “unusual kingship” before I went to seminary while working as a college student for the St. Vincent de Paul Society. I had been doing refugee resettlement work and – in that context – came to know the plight of families needing asylum from El Salvador during that terrible civil war. Father Ron and I were both on the board of the Salvadoran Guatemalan Refugee program and it was while on that board I first met the vocation director for the Archdiocese of Seattle which led me to seminary and later my own vocation to priesthood.

Much later on as the new bishop of Yakima, Father Ron came in to see me. He was still advocating for the powerless even in retirement. Indeed, he let me know he was running for public office. “Public office,” I wondered to myself. I tried not let my eyebrows arch too much. But then he explained that he wanted to become a freeholder for the city of Yakima in order to write a new city charter that would allow district representation on the city council. Right now the election primaries are by district but the general election for council is citywide, often eliminating Hispanic candidates from the east side of Yakima. He said he wasn't actually going to run for the city council, but just work so that others could run and have a chance of winning – especially from our growing Hispanic community here in Yakima. He even gave me a campaign button. I told him that I'd keep his button as a class-one relic in the event that he's canonized a saint.

Later on, when Fr. Patnode came to my office to give me the bad news about his cancer – after the anointing of the sick – we got into a conversation about ministry to migrants here in Central Washington. Fr. Patnode was quite intrigued by the new direction we've taking with seminarians working in the fields alongside migrant laborers, since the genesis of our summer seminarian placements go back to some work he'd started while director of Hispanic ministry. The point – of course – is that if we are going to elevate the bread and wine with any integrity at Eucharist – we

ought to know in a more direct fashion the “gifts of the earth and the work of human hands” that bring those gifts to the Eucharist.

Fr. Patnode trusted this pathway in his priestly ministry precisely because it led him to see Christ and thus be motivated to build up this “unusual kingdom” and thus the second and closing point of my homily today: the grace of burying Fr. Patnode on the Feast of St. Francis Xavier.

When Pope Francis was first elected there was some confusion of whether he meant St. Francis of Assisi or his Jesuit confrere, St. Francis Xavier. We are beginning to see a bit of both in this new Holy Father. St. Francis Xavier, who died December 2, 1552, met St. Ignatius in Paris and followed him to Rome helping to start the Society of Jesus. He later went to India, the Philippines, Japan and then – finally – China where he died.

Those are the bare bone facts of this Feast but I think they speak to Father Ron Patnode’s willingness to go to every end in proposing the unusual king we celebrate at the end of the year as well as the unusual king we welcome at the end of this Advent season: – a king who comes – not as a powerful ruler – but a vulnerable infant – a king whose capital city lies – not in the center of the worldly power like Rome or Jerusalem – but the defeated Davidic city of Bethlehem – a king who hold court – not with the wealthy and powerful – but with the shepherds of the field – a king whose army comes – not as soldiers with swords – but angels with wings – a heavenly king who comes to the uncounted and undocumented that the worldly Caesar Augustus is trying to count!

While this Feast of Christ the King and this Feast of St. Francis Xavier are certainly appropriate bookends of our giving thanks to God for the gift of Fr. Ron Patnode, his life is meant to “bookend” our own missionary efforts – for this Mass of the Resurrection is meant to send us out on a mission.

Perhaps this is why Father Patnode selected this Gospel from St. John and his account of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples for – as the Gospel unfolds – Jesus specifically selects this act of lowly service to initiate his apostles as leaders into his “unusual kingdom.”

As we bid farewell to our friend Father Ron Patnode, we might want to evaluate: Will we do the same? May we do on the weekday what we celebrate on Sunday! May we become bread of life for those around us – near and far – and in doing so may we – like Father Ron Patnode – build up the unusual kingdom who is Jesus Christ. Peace be with you!