

THE RECTOR'S CHRONICLE

A NEWSLETTER OF THE CHURCH OF ST MICHAEL THE ARCHANGEL

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210 W. ALLENS LANE, PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA 19119

215-247-1092

November, 2010

Dear Parishioners and Friends,

How much does it cost? What is it worth? How often we ask these questions, whether we are buying a rug for the living room or a mutual fund for the retirement account (hopefully, there is one!). We are concerned for value, for getting our money's worth – and quite reasonably. This is good stewardship (though it may also be greed). But what about being Christian: what is that worth? How much does it cost?

The first question is easy: it is worth a lot. It means eternal life in heaven with God, and all the unimaginable joys and delights which go along with that. It is the fulfillment of our deepest desires. It is the completion of everything that is of value on earth, goodness, truth, beauty. It is the pearl of great price (St Matthew 13:46) – the most valuable pearl there is.

What does it cost? That question is also easy to answer (because Jesus has told us): everything. The merchant who bought the pearl of great price first went and sold all that he had. *All* that he had. We might not think him much of a merchant, since he does not appear to envision selling the pearl to someone else at a profit. But that is not really the point of the parable. The point is that the pearl is the one thing that matters to him, and he does not hesitate when the price of the pearl is all that he has. It's not like the bankruptcy court which allows you to keep your house and furniture and car while selling the other assets to satisfy your debts. Everything means everything.

That seems a high price. It *is* a high price. So we should ask: is it worth the cost? Most of us would say yes, certainly. Eternal joys are worth the price of temporal goods, however great the temporal value. The two are in fact incommensurate. God asks of us far less than He gives Himself. In fact, He asks of us only what we need to give up in order to receive what He would give us as His free gift. Unlike the parable of the pearl of great price, we do not actually purchase heaven: God offers it to us as a gift. What we must give up, we must give up in order to receive the gift. Tightly clenched fists cannot hold the proffered Christmas present. Likewise will we refuse God's gift so long as we cling to our material possessions, our pride, our control of our lives, our selfishness, our self-pity, our desire for retribution towards those who have wronged us. These are the things we must "sell" in order to "buy" the pearl of great price. Costly? Yes. Worth it? Also, yes.

It is easy to see why it may be harder for a rich man to make the "purchase" than for a poor man: it appears to him more costly, and he is apt to be more concerned with the calculation about whether it is worth it. The rich young ruler (St Luke 18:18f.) went away sorrowful when Jesus invited him to sell what he had and give to the poor, and then come and follow him, freed from the burden of his wealth. Wealth is a burden because it tends to make us more concerned with the material things, and thus with the cost (potential or actual) of following Christ. The rich man looks at the poor man and thinks, "What has he got to lose? It would cost him nothing compared to me." While the poor man has fewer material possessions, he can have just as much pride, and spiritual baggage as the rich man. Both must give all that they have if they wish to enjoy God's gift.

Yet it is also important to remember that while the pearl of great price cost the merchant *all* that he had, it did not cost him *more* than he had. There is none of us too poor (or too rich) to afford the pearl of great price. We need not worry that it is beyond us. God has provided for that. It is of great comfort to know that our resources will not fall short of what is required of us. We need not fear that something of such great value will be beyond our means.

When we look at our Christian lives, we tend to focus on the first of the questions posed above: what does it cost us? The costs often loom large for us, especially those related to self. But it is the second question – the value – which is perhaps the more important. If we keep our focus on the value of what God is giving us, then no cost will seem too great. We will be delighted at what is promised, at what will be ours in God's good time, and what is already ours in part. Touched by His generosity, we will be ready to give up whatever He might ask of us. He has, after all, made us His children, without our having any claim upon His generosity. Being converted by His gratuitous and profligate love for us, we will want to conform our wills to His. The value swallows up the cost.

But there is another reason to keep the focus on the value: the good of others. God wills all people to come to the knowledge of His love – to receive the pearl. The principal way He brings people to Himself is through His Body: us, in other words. If we value God's love for us more than we value anything else, then we will be ready to commend the faith that is in us. If on the other hand, we focus on the cost, we will be hesitant

to recommend Christ to others, since we will be all too aware of what it might cost them. Then we will not be good or effective witnesses to our Lord. The value of His precious gift will be concealed. All the more reason to keep our attention on the value of what God gives us and does for us, rather than focusing on what the Christian life costs us. It is sometimes said of a football team (usually the underdog, and usually after they lose), "They gave their all." Likewise, it is (rightly) said of the soldier who dies in battle, "He gave his all." As Christians, we would not want people (or the angels in heaven) to say less of us.

Thanksgiving

If we keep the focus on the value, then we will inevitably live lives of gratitude. Knowing how much more we are given than we deserve leads to thanksgiving. This is expressed at every Mass, the "Eucharist" (which is the Greek word for thanksgiving), the Great Thanksgiving. We are also given the opportunity to give thanks in the annual secular Thanksgiving Day. I'm sure you all learned the story in school – how the Puritans in Massachusetts invited the Indians to join them in a "feast" in thanksgiving for their survival that first year in the New World. They had little in a material way to give thanks for besides their survival, but that was enough for them: they believed that it was God's hand that had given them life. We have vastly greater material wealth for which to give thanks. And we have the benefits of a society and political system which values freedom, however imperfectly the value may be realized in particular circumstances. We need not regard the United States as perfect to join in giving thanks for the blessings which God has conferred on this land, and on us insofar as we are Americans. I hope you will give thanks. I hope you will also join in the parish Mass on Thanksgiving Day, which is November 25th this year. The Mass will be at the rectory Oratory at ten.

Advent

Christmas arriving on a Saturday this year, Advent is almost as long as it ever gets: Advent Sunday is November 28th. A new treat this year is the Advent set of paintings for the altarpiece at the Chapel of Peace. Chris Jordan has been painting away (not frantically, I hope) and has finished the set so that they will be ready for the beginning of Advent. I have had a preview, and can attest that they are more than up to her already high standards. Naturally enough the eight scenes deal with Advent themes. I won't give anything away here, so you will have the opportunity to impress your friends by identifying all of them.

As in the past, we will provide an Advent Quiet Day as an opportunity to prepare spiritually for the coming of Christ at Christmas. Sometimes it helps us to go outside the daily routine of our prayers to offer God the opportunity to do something out of the ordinary with us. I encourage you to plan now to attend, and resist the encroachments of the often busy December. It will be on Saturday, December 18th, 9:30-2 at All Saints, Wynnewood.

Shoe Boxes

We plan to assemble the annual shoe box Christmas gift project on Sunday, November 14th, during coffee hour. These are sent as Christmas presents to children around the world through the Samaritan's Purse charity. A list of suggested items is available on Sunday or at the rectory – small toys, toothpaste and brushes, markers, pads, hard candy, etc. (No more pencils this year, please.) We also need contributions of \$7 per box for shipping. Adults are welcome to help assemble the boxes on the 14th. Samaritan's Purse adds a small tract explaining Christmas to each box. Speak with Beth if you have any questions.

Parish Discussions of the Ordinariate

Our consideration of the Anglican Ordinariate (in communion with the Roman Catholic Church) continues. The next session is Sunday, November 7th from 9 to 9:45. Having it between the Masses will make it easier for folk who are at the eight o'clock Mass to participate – and also be sure it does not go on too long! I hope all parishioners will make every effort to be there. Having reviewed (in August) the Apostolic Constitution which establishes the Ordinariate, we are now at the stage of listening to one another, and sharing our thoughts and concerns about whether it is right for St Michael's to join the Ordinariate. We will take as much time for this as we need, though we also recognize that the present uncertainty is stressful. So we do not want to drag out the process either. Then the remaining steps in the process are these: an overview of the dogmatic differences between what we have practiced as Anglicans and what is practiced in the Roman communion; then a survey of the parish on where people are and why; then the vestry's consideration of the survey and the question itself, leading to a vestry recommendation to the parish; and then, following a similar recommendation from me, a decision by the parish. Since this is a corporate as well as an individual decision, I would ask that all parishioners be involved in the process. If I can answer any questions about either the process or the Ordinariate please ask.

Kudos

Thanks goes this month to:

- the Wednesday Bible study, for last month's *Chronicle* mailing.
- Vanessa and Delbert Franklin for starting a Sunday School class for the pre-schoolers.
- Gary Sugden for providing altar flowers for the Chapel of Peace.

Faithfully,

