

Homily at welcoming Mass for the UC Davis Newman Center at St. James Parish in Davis, 26th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Sept. 29, 2013

In the much talked-about interview that Pope Francis granted to the Jesuit journals he cited a Latin phrase taken from one of the commentaries of St. Bede the Venerable, *Miserando atque Eligendo*. Translated, it means “having mercy and calling”. St. Bede was commenting on the call of Matthew found in the Gospel of Matthew, chapter nine. The saintly author said Jesus looked with mercy on Matthew then called the tax collector to leave his post and follow him. The Holy Father took this as his motto because that was how he experienced the call of the Lord Jesus. It was also part of his response to the first question of the interviewer, “Who is Jorge Mario Bergoglio?” Pope Francis’s immediate response was, “I am a sinner.” He then made reference to his motto, *Miserando atque Eligendo*. The Pope saw himself as called by the mercy of Jesus to be a disciple.

He illustrated this further describing a painting by Caravaggio of the *Call of Matthew*. In that renaissance painting, Matthew is sitting in the shadows clutching the money he has garnered from taxes. Rays of light from a window stream across the painting to fall on Matthew with his head bowed down. Under on the window is Jesus pointing his finger at the tax collector showing him mercy and calling Matthew to follow him. The painting –with Caravaggio’s artistic flare – captures the tension of that moment of truth, the fork in the road for Matthew. Will he lift his eyes to see the light of mercy? Will he take his hand from the pile of coins to take the hand Jesus has extended to him? Will he let go of what he knows and place his trust in the one, who with mercy, calls him to a new life?

In the second reading today (I Tm. 6.11-16), Paul strongly urges Timothy, “Lay hold of eternal life, to which you were called.” He tells the young disciple “to keep the commandment without stain or reproach until the appearance of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Paul conjuring up the image of the heavenly kingdom, boldly says to the youthful Timothy, “I charge you before God, who gives life to all things.” Paul wanted Timothy to understand “the breadth and length and height and depth ... of the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge.” (Eph. 3.18) Paul knew the costs of such discipleship but he also recognized the wonderful mercy that called him when he was a great sinner on the road to Damascus. He did not want Timothy to miss his opportunity for a new life.

These challenging words from Paul as well as the humble reflections of the Holy Father help us see the rich man's missed opportunity (Lk. 16.19-31). It was not just that the rich man had ignored Lazarus. He was numb, completely aware of God's mercy calling him to a richer communion of life. The rich man was too absorbed in his own pleasures to see the misery of Lazarus or to recognize the brotherly bond existing between them. All too late he recognized Lazarus when he thirsted for just a drop of water to ease his torment. The exchange between Abraham and the anguished rich man about Moses and the prophets is a reference to the covenant. That ancient covenant formed between Abraham and God in the early pages of Genesis called for the care of the poor and the stranger, the widow and the orphan. The covenant was intended to create a communion of life shared between God and his people. In the judgment scene, with the rich man lost in the netherworld and Lazarus comforted in the bosom of Abraham, God sets the world aright after the rich man had lost his opportunity to do so.

During his visit to the Brazil, Pope Francis challenged the multitude of youth and all the Church to create a culture of encounter to counteract what he sees as a growing culture of exclusion. Today's parable dramatically portrays what such exclusion can do. The poor, the unborn, the unemployed, the youth, the incarcerated, the immigrant, the frail elderly are the today's Lazarus grabbing for the crumbs of our indifference. Their plights offer us an opportunity for a new encounter with Christ.

You are beginning a new school year, filled with wonderful opportunities to grow in knowledge and develop skills for the future. Where will these opportunities lead you? A university education can be used to pursue an exclusive life style, one of privilege. Heeding the gospel message of today, you may choose to place at the service of others your gifts and talents as well as the knowledge and skills gain from your studies. You can help create a culture of human encounter that brings about a richer solidarity among the diversity of cultures, languages, and customs.

The Lord Jesus invites us all to discover his mercy calling us to a richer communion of life. Will we miss our opportunity to say "yes"?