

Sometimes a particular topic will stand out in one of the weekday Masses – maybe something that is particularly relevant to modern life and circumstances or popular belief – a good topic for a bulletin article, something to stop and spend time with. Such was the case two Fridays ago (Feb 7). First, though, these readings from weekday Mass can be a reminder to make a concerted effort to get to a weekday at least 1x/wk.

The Gospel for that Friday recounted the martyrdom of St John the Baptist, while the first reading was from the Letter to the Hebrews. The letter to the Hebrews is filled with deep and profound theology on priesthood, the sacrifice of Christ, and the Mass. However, this particular reading was presenting just some simple, straightforward exhortations such as: be hospitable, visit the imprisoned, do not commit adultery, be free of the love of money, and be content with what you have. The reading ends with a reminder that doing and not doing these things has consequences, consequences that are forever.

One underlying message that comes out of both this first reading and the Gospel is very simply that:

What we do and don't do *does* matter.

And not only does it matter, but what we do and don't has *eternal* consequences. This includes every thought, word, and deed; it includes our motives and intentions; it includes whether or not we consciously and intentionally choose to develop real virtue, starting with learning what that really means or entails.

Maybe it is that saying: “what we do and don't do does matter” sounds too basic or obvious. And yet how often people live as if that's not the case. This might be especially obvious with young people who have grown up in an atmosphere where gross immorality is considered normal – abortion is legal and ok; couples live together outside of marriage all the time; contraception is considered good; same-sex acts are acceptable, drugs aren't so bad, some states have even legalized marijuana, and on and on it goes. The message of all this is: what I do and don't does not matter. The belief that what I do and don't do doesn't matter might be *more* pronounced among younger people especially in the area of sexual morality, but that's not to say that such a belief is limited to young people. The last 2 weeks the bulletin articles have talked about “leisure” and its purpose, with some emphasis on the fact that God commands it. And yet, how many people will actually take that seriously? Why not? Because it doesn't matter, there's no consequences. Even when it's clear that this or that is the Lord's command, this false belief of “it doesn't matter” often infiltrates a person's mind such that we end up ignoring our Lord's clear commands. In fact, “it doesn't matter” forms part of every temptation; at the moment, the person convinces themselves that there's no real consequences for what they are about to do or not do.

It is helpful to see concrete examples of how what we do and don't do does matter. This includes our interior “actions” – beliefs, thoughts, motives, and intentions. The exterior actions we choose – what we choose to do and not do – begin with our interior actions. The martyrdom of St John the Baptist provides a good illustration.

Recall the whole situation. John had told Herod publicly that taking his brother's wife, Herodias, as his own was gravely wrong. Herod himself liked John, liked listening to him, in spite of that. Herod was intrigued, even somewhat fascinated by his words and was drawn to them. So we see here some interior movement of Herod towards God, some good disposition, what could have been the beginning of conversion. So what happened? Well, Herodias, in contrast to Herod, bore a strong resentment towards John the Baptist. Herod, then, had him jailed, apparently, it seems, to placate Herodias.

Then what happened? Well Herod's birthday came along and he wanted to throw a big party for all of his friends. In part, he wanted to show off some. At one point during the party his niece, Herodias' daughter, came in and performed a provocative dance for Herod and his friends. After this Herod is controlled by lust. He tells his niece to ask for anything, even up to half his kingdom. She asks her mother, Herodias, what she should ask for and Herodias says the head of John the Baptist on a platter. His niece goes and repeats this request to Herod. Herod now thinks he's trapped, he doesn't want to do it but he doesn't want to lose face in front of his friends; he's controlled by pride. Herod himself holds John in high regard, he likes him, and yet he orders him to be beheaded, he orders the death of this man of God, this prophet, this friend of God. The party is over.

How did it come to this? Because at no point in the progression of these events did Herod stop and say: wait a minute, what I do and don't do will have consequences. Herod committed an atrocious act. Even if John had not been a great saint, John's execution was a gross injustice, it was murder and a gross abuse of power – one he didn't even want to commit. How did he arrive at that point? By everything he did and didn't do up to that point. Everything he did and didn't do prior to the beheading of John mattered. Let's review.

- He took his brother's wife. This immoral act, which is grave matter in itself, was the start of everything. What he did there did matter. But yet, he was beginning to listen to John – the possibility of conversion. However, what he did and didn't do after that also determined his fate.
- He did not focus on what was right and just. He had no justified reason to lock up John. He should have put what is right first, he should have put God first – this is something he did not do. Instead, he put his own affections and his desire to be pleasing to Herodias first.
- He wanted to show off, impress others. That's an interior movement or action. It was fine to have a celebration but we have to catch these sort of things within ourselves and curtail them. Had he not had this motive, things would not have progressed as they did. What he did and didn't do here did matter.
- Lust. This was a core problem for Herod. There was, first of all, no reason to have his own niece come in and perform that dance. But then, after he did and allowed himself to get all stirred up by it, he should have had the wisdom, the wherewithal, the maturity to demand from himself that he regain control of himself. He didn't. It doesn't matter, I can yield to my passions, what difference does it make? It's my prerogative.
  - Did Herod bother trying to attain to true wisdom? Did he make good use of leisure time? The evidence indicates that almost certainly he did not. If he had, he would have pressed himself to regain his composure after that dance and not be controlled by lust. But instead, like a child with no interest in self-control, he promises her whatever she asks for. What he didn't do – not seeking real wisdom and seeking to live by it – had consequences. The same is and will be true for each of us.
- Finally comes the request for the head of John the Baptist. Now even at this point Herod could have backed out of the situation. He could have regained control of himself and said no. He did have a choice. But he chose otherwise. He chose to be controlled by pride – he didn't want to lose face in front of his guests. The choice he made did make a difference.

Hopefully the example of Herod illustrates well that every *single* thing we do *and* don't do does matter. Notice that there was a progression of events – what he did and didn't do – that led up to his gross, irreversible act of injustice. The important point is that he could have cut it off at any point. This example of Herod is a good one to let sink into our minds. As the old saying goes – if you're in a hole, stop digging. This is how evil progresses, we just keep letting it go. It can be cut off at any point. Remember this. Confession, incidentally, is a powerful aid in stopping this progression of evil.

The *true* belief that what I do and don't do *does* matter, not just in the here and now but forever, is demanding. It's just plain easier to ignore it and follow my own immediate desires or whatever seems expedient. So why bother? Well for one thing, believing and acting as if what I do and don't do doesn't matter can *only* end in a terribly depressing despair because if it's true that what I do doesn't matter, it means I don't matter, it means there's no point to my existence. Embracing the truth that it does matter is enlivening, not burdening. Think also of how much trouble people would have saved themselves – in this life, yes, but certainly for their eternal existence – if they had only stopped for a moment to think: what I do and don't do does matter. Think about this for your own self. I know I can certainly say that. This is a simple principle of life that we should learn, practice, and teach to our young people. It is lost only to our own detriment.

This past week the first reading has been the first few chapters of the Book of Genesis – the creation accounts. Think of the enormous, even mind-boggling, consequences of Adam & Eve's single act of disobedience and their subsequent refusal to go to Confession. The frigid winters endured in South Dakota are a result of this. Every war, famine, disease, illness, and death is a consequence of this. Did consequences for man's actions stop with Adam & Eve? Of course not. We are now just more easily fooled into believing so.

*God bless you, Fr Kuhn.*