

**HOMILY FOR THE 150<sup>th</sup> ANNIVERSARY MASS OF  
ST. JOHN THE EVANGELIST PARISH, CARROLLTON, ILLINOIS**

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois  
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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, it is good to be with you to celebrate this Mass for the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of St. John the Evangelist Parish.

Some very significant things happened 150 years ago. On November 6, 1860, a man from central Illinois named Abraham Lincoln was elected as the 16th President of the United States of America. As we all know, that election would have a significant impact on American history.

Also 150 years ago, a new parish dedicated to St. John the Evangelist was established here in Carrollton. That event would also have a significant impact, but in a much different way. This parish may not be well known outside of the Springfield diocese, but it has touched the lives and hearts of the people who have been coming here for the past 150 years.

This parish has brought many blessings, graces and consolations to those who have taken part in the Eucharist here, received the sacraments, and prayed for their loved ones when they died. I pray that it will continue to do so for many more years to come.

In nineteenth-century England, William Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan wrote a number of comic operas that entertained the people of their day and have continued to delight audiences ever since. Among them, one of the most popular is *The Pirates of Penzance*. Its alternative title is "The Slave of Duty," because it concerns a young man, Frederick, whose sense of duty is outstanding.

Frederick is apprenticed to a gang of pirates (who in the opera are, inevitably, comic characters, not to be taken seriously) until – and this is an important point – his twenty-first birthday. Unfortunately, just as he is about to be released from his bonds, having lived for twenty-one years, it is revealed that he was born on the 29<sup>th</sup> of February in a leap year so that, technically, he will have had only five birthdays by the time he is twenty-one. Frederick believes that he is obliged, therefore, to return to the pirates; and that he will not be free, nor see Mabel, his sweetheart, again, until he is in his mid-eighties. However, after a lot of fun and nonsense, he is eventually freed and reunited with his beloved.

A sense of duty is highly commendable, but being a slave to duty, as we see, is not always good. It all depends on to whom or to what we are a slave. In Gilbert and Sullivan's opera, the obedience of duty is demanded

by a comical gang of pirates; in our day, we may all too often see such obedience commanded in their members by extremist groups or terrorist organizations, often with deadly consequences. In these cases, the sense of duty is misguided, and does not contribute to the common good.

The Gospel reading today talks of duty in the sense that is shared by parents who make sacrifices for their children, or by members of the armed services who risk their lives for their country. It is especially commendable when expressed by servicemen and women who rescue their comrades while under fire and who humbly declare such heroism to be no more than their duty. Duty does not expect reward – it is simply the discharge of a moral obligation.

We are morally obliged to God for everything, from our lives to the world around us. Everything has been given to us by God. We owe God for everything, and God would be entitled to command our absolute obedience. But God's way is not generally to issue strict demands of us; rather, God issues the invitation to us to accept the gift of faith, openly and freely, with our minds as well as our hearts.

Jesus' words in the Gospel today assure us that even a tiny amount of faith, a minute mustard seed of it, can go a very long way. It can change

our lives. It can provide the pattern for our lives. It can even bring us into relationship with the Divine. Of course, this relationship is not one of equals – how could it be? The illustration Jesus uses today reminds us that in his day slaves and masters were not equals. The slave could not demand anything of the master, as the master owed the slave nothing. In the same way, how could we demand anything of God? We cannot badger or blackmail God, bully or bargain to get our way.

Yet God works in paradoxes. By accepting that we are God's creatures, by acknowledging our debt of duty to our creator, we are given the greatest gift of all. We are invited to a share in the divine life itself. We become children of God, heirs of the kingdom. Our slavery is turned into freedom. We who are entitled to nothing are freely given everything. By living more for God and for others, and less for our own selfish selves, more and more is the life we receive.

We do not deserve the life of glory, the life of everlasting happiness, any more than we deserved the life we were given at our conception. We cannot claim heaven as a right, as payment for good behavior, or for regular attendance at Mass, or for being a generally nice person. All is gift, and we have been given the freedom to accept it or not.

Your parish has a patron saint, St. John the Evangelist, who was a shining example of someone responding freely and enthusiastically to the gift God's love. It is God who calls; human beings answer. The vocation of John and his brother James is stated very simply in the Gospels, along with that of Peter and his brother Andrew: Jesus called them; they followed. The completeness of their response is indicated by the account. James and John "were in a boat, with their father Zebedee, mending their nets. He called them, and immediately they left their boat and their father and followed him" (Matthew 4:21b-22).

For the three former fishermen—Peter, James and John—that faith was to be rewarded by a special friendship with Jesus. They alone were privileged to be present at the Transfiguration, the raising of the daughter of Jairus and the agony in Gethsemane. But John's friendship was even more special.

John's own Gospel refers to him as "the disciple whom Jesus loved" (see John 13:23; 19:26; 20:2), the one who reclined next to Jesus at the Last Supper, and the one to whom he gave the exquisite honor, as he stood beneath the cross, of caring for his mother. "Woman, behold your son....Behold, your mother" (John 19:26b, 27b).

Because of the depth of his Gospel, John is usually thought of as the eagle of theology, soaring in high regions that other writers did not enter. But the Gospels also reveal some very human traits. Jesus gave James and John the nickname, “sons of thunder.” While it is difficult to know exactly what this meant, a clue is given in two incidents.

In the first, as Matthew tells it, their mother asked that they might sit in the places of honor in Jesus’ kingdom – one on his right hand, one on his left. When Jesus asked them if they could drink the cup he would drink and be baptized with his baptism of pain, they blithely answered, “We can!” Jesus said that they would indeed share his cup, but that sitting at his right hand was not his to give. It was for those to whom it had been reserved by the Father. The other apostles were indignant at the mistaken ambition of the brothers, and Jesus took the occasion to teach them the true nature of authority: “...[W]hoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave. Just so, the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:27-28).

On another occasion the “sons of thunder” asked Jesus if they should not call down fire from heaven upon the Samaritans for their inhospitality,

since they would not welcome Jesus because he was on his way to Jerusalem. But Jesus “turned and rebuked them” (see Luke 9:51-55).

On the first Easter, Mary Magdalene “ran and went to Simon Peter and to the other disciple whom Jesus loved, and told them, ‘They have taken the Lord from the tomb, and we don’t know where they put him’” (John 20:2). John recalls, perhaps with a smile, that he and Peter ran side by side, but then “the other disciple ran faster than Peter and arrived at the tomb first” (John 20:4b). He did not enter, but waited for Peter and let him go in first. “Then the other disciple also went in, the one who had arrived at the tomb first, and he saw and believed” (John 20:8).

John was with Peter when the first great miracle after the Resurrection took place—the cure of the man crippled from birth—which led to their spending the night in jail together. The mysterious experience of the Resurrection is perhaps best contained in the words of Acts: “Observing the boldness of Peter and John and perceiving them to be uneducated, ordinary men, they [the questioners] were amazed, and they recognized them as the companions of Jesus” (Acts 4:13).

The Apostle John is traditionally considered the author of the Fourth Gospel, three New Testament letters and the Book of Revelation. His

Gospel is a very personal account. He sees the glorious and divine Jesus already in the incidents of his mortal life. At the Last Supper, John's Jesus speaks as if he were already in heaven. It is the Gospel of Jesus' glory.

Our Eucharist today gives us a taste of heaven. Like St. John, may we respond with lives that sing God's praises and follow His will.

As you may know, it has become customary for me to sing a song in my homily on special occasions, and the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of a parish is very special, so I would like to leave you with a song that is really a prayer from one of my favorite singers, Bruce Springsteen. The song is called "Into the Fire," which Bruce Springsteen wrote shortly after 9-11-2001 as a tribute to the firefighters and other rescue workers who literally went up into the fire trying to save others and sacrificing their own lives in the process. It is a prayer for God's strength and for the theological virtues of faith, hope and love, which I pray God will give you through your worship in this new church.

May your strength give us strength,

May your faith give us faith,

May your hope give us hope,

May your love give us love. Amen!