

**2012 Red Mass Homily
Archdiocese of Anchorage**

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September 30, 2012

S.S.P.: There but for the Grace of God...

(*Sing:*) Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see.

In the famous film *Ben Hur*, the actor Charlton Heston plays the central role of an aristocratic Jew, growing up in Jerusalem, with fellow Romans as friends. An ardent promoter of his people's independence, Ben Hur finds himself at odds with his one-time Roman friend. Their rivalry eventually leads to Ben Hur's arrest, and he is condemned to serve in the Roman galley ships.

On the way to the coast, being driven along in a chain gang, the new slaves halt at a village called Nazareth, for rest and refreshment. They are given water to drink, all except Ben Hur. It seems his death sentence will be hastened by rough treatment. A local man appears and approaches quietly, and gives water to Ben Hur to drink. Even a scolding from the Roman

commander does not prevent this simple act of mercy. After the cup of water, the condemned men move on.

Some years later, the roles in this story are reversed. The man from Nazareth is now the condemned man, on his way to certain death, on a hill outside Jerusalem. Ben Hur, restored to freedom and to his family, is in the crowd that watches the procession pass by. When the condemned man stumbles, Ben Hur moves forward to help him, and offers him some water, for pity's sake. The two men look into each other's face, and know that their story has come full circle. As the soldiers roughly push Jesus away and on to his death, Ben Hur utters his cry, "I know this man!"

The man that Ben Hur came to know is Jesus Christ. And water features prominently in the teaching that Jesus gave. Water is the essential requirement for life, and the giving of water to others is the fundamental act of sharing life with them. In many societies the well has been the central meeting place for the community. It is from the well that each person and each family draws water for daily life. To give water to another person is to say, "I want you to live."

Today we hear the Gospel words, "If anyone gives you a cup of water to drink just because you belong to Christ, then I tell you solemnly,

he will most certainly not lose his reward." This seemingly insignificant act is, in fact, full of meaning and full of power. It speaks of our connectedness to one another. We are all human beings, with the same flesh and blood. In another human being we see someone exactly like ourselves. We know the same joys and sorrows, the same peace and pain. We laugh and cry, feel happiness and despair like each other. We can say, like Ben Hur, as we look into the face of another, "I know this man, this woman."

When we begin to know one another, we begin to accept one another, we begin to honor one another. The bonds of our connectedness are strengthened. It is when we do not know one another, when we choose not to know one another, that evil things are done. St James has a chilling line in his letter, "In the time of slaughter you went on eating to your heart's content." For us to live our lives and not care about the sufferings of others would be a violation of the moral imperative by which we are all bound.

What little we can do, we must do. As Ben Hur was led to his imprisonment and slavery, the man from Nazareth could not save him. But he could give him water, and he did so. When the man from Nazareth was being led to his death, Ben Hur could not save him, but he could give him water, and he did.

Our power in this world is far greater than we think. It can be put to work every day and in every incident of our lives. We have been blessed with the Spirit of God, which revives the soul. We can give the “cup of water” to each person we meet. It can take the form of kindness, patience, understanding: the gifts of the Spirit that the Lord has so kindly given to us. In the Old Testament reading, Moses wishes that the whole people were filled with God’s Spirit. We have been given the same Spirit to transform the world in our day.

There is an old and familiar line that goes: There but for the grace of God go I. We often use this line when we see someone who has experienced a tragedy or something bad in their life and we realize, but by the grace of God that could have been me.

This saying is attributed to John Bradford. Bradford’s quote was prompted when he saw a group of criminals being led to their executions. Little did he know how true his quote, and the context in which he said it, would become for him. John Bradford was an English preacher born in 1510 who at the age of 45 was executed by burning at the stake. His crime was preaching the true Gospel of Jesus Christ and exposing England as a nation that had forsaken God. At that moment in his life, on July 15, 1555,

the grace of God was sufficient for John Bradford as he gave up his earthly life to enter into eternal life. John Bradford reminds all of us that we can only go from day to day, moment to moment, by the grace of our God.

As we too experience persecution in our own lives for what we believe and proclaim, as we acknowledge our own sinful ways, as we seek a conversion of our own souls that will open our heart and eyes to see more clearly and dearly Jesus Christ as our own Lord and Savior, we realize that in the end we can only go from day to day, moment to moment, by the grace of our God. Our deepest prayer every day is simply: "There with the help of God's grace, I pray go I."

In keeping with our vocational call in the legal profession, in our Red Mass today we seek to know the truth that will prevail, to pursue liberty and justice for all, to embrace a law of love that puts us into a right relationship with God and one another, to embody a civil discourse that leads to peace, and to see the face of the Lord in all those we serve. Let our deepest prayer every day be simply: "There with the help of God's grace, I pray go I."

(Sing:) Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see.