

Homily 28

From the Gospel of John (4, 46-53):

Now there was a royal official whose son was ill in Capernaum. When he heard that Jesus had arrived in Galilee from Judea, he went to him and asked him to come down and heal his son, who was near death. Jesus said to him, “Unless you people see signs and wonders, you will not believe.” The royal official said to him, “Sir, come down before my child dies.” Jesus said to him, “You may go; your son will live.” The man believed what Jesus said to him and left. While he was on his way back, his slaves met him and told him that his boy would live. He asked them when he began to recover. They told him, “The fever left him yesterday, about one in the afternoon.” The father realized that just at the time Jesus had said to him, “Your son will live,” and he and his whole household came to believe.

1. There is no need for me to explain the reading from the holy Gospel which you have just heard, my friends. But I am going to say something about it, more in the way of counsel than of explanation, so that I will not seem to have passed over it in silence. I see only one thing that I need to explain to you, why the one who had come for a cure heard the words: *Unless you see signs and portents, you do not believe*. The one who was seeking a cure for his son surely believed; he wouldn't be seeking a cure from one he didn't believe could do it. Why, then, did he hear the words: *Unless you see signs and portents, you do not believe*, when he believed before he saw the sign? But recall what he was asking, and you will see that his faith was in doubt. He asked Jesus earnestly to come down and heal his son. He was asking for the physical presence of the Lord, who is nowhere absent in his spirit. He had little faith in one he thought could not heal unless he was physically present. If he had believed completely he would have known that there was no place where God was not present. He was considerably distrustful, then, since it was not the Lord's greatness he esteemed but his physical presence. He sought a cure for his son even though his faith was in doubt, since he believed that the one he had approached had the power to cure, and yet he thought he was not with his dying son. But the Lord whom he asked to come revealed that he was not absent from the place he was invited to. He who created everything by his will performed the cure by his command alone.

2. In this matter we must pay careful attention to what we have learned from the testimony of another evangelist. A centurion came to the Lord saying: *Sir, my son is lying at home paralyzed and in great pain.* Jesus immediately answered him: *I myself will come and heal him.* Why is it that when the ruler asked him to come to his son he refused to go there in person, but he promised to go in person to the servant, when the centurion had not asked him to do so? He did not condescend to be physically present to the ruler's son, but did hurry to the side of the centurion's servant. Why was this, except to check our pride? We do not respect in people their nature, made in God's image, but their riches and reputation. When we consider what is important about them we scarcely regard what they are within. We pay attention to what is physically displeasing about them and neglect to consider what they are. Our Redeemer, to show us that the things human beings regard highly are displeasing to the saints, and that we are not to be displeased by what humans consider displeasing, refused to go to the ruler's son but was ready to go to the centurion's servant. He was rebuking our pride, then, which does not know how to consider human beings as such. As I said, it considers only the external aspects of people, not looking at their nature or acknowledging God's honor present in people. God's Son does not choose to go to the ruler's son, yet he is ready to come to cure a servant. Certainly, if some one's servant asked us, [saying that] we should come to him, our pride would immediately suggest to our minds, You shouldn't go because you would be lowering yourself; you would be risking your reputation and cheapen your position. You see that one came from heaven who was not reluctant to hasten to a servant on earth, and yet we who are of the earth refuse to be humbled on earth. What is of less worth in God's sight, what more displeasing to him, than for us to preserve our reputation before men and not to fear the eyes of our conscience? In the Gospel the Lord has told the Pharisees: *You are the ones who make yourselves righteous before your fellow men, but God knows your hearts; what is highly regarded by human beings is loathsome in the sight of God.* See, my friend, see what he is saying. If what is highly regarded by human beings is loathsome in God's sight, the thoughts of our hearts are lower in his sight the higher the regard they receive from humans, and the humility of our hearts is more highly regarded by God the lower it is in human eyes.

3. Let us then not be pleased if we are successful in anything, let us not be proud of our activities, let our material goods and glory not exalt us. If we swell up with pride about any good things that come our way we are displeasing to God. The psalmist says of the humble: *The Lord protects the little ones*. Since he was calling the humble “little ones,” after this saying he added something else. As if we were asking him what he would do in such a case, he added: *I was made humble, and he set me free*. Think of these things, my friend. Consider them with all your attention. Do not respect this world’s goods in your neighbors. For the Lord’s sake honor in those who are not placed in authority over you the fact that they have been created in God’s image. As far as your neighbors are concerned, you serve them truly if you are not swollen with pride in your heart beforehand. No one who still exalts himself because of things that pass away knows how to respect what is lasting in his neighbor. Do not consider what you have but what you are. The world you love is passing away. The saints at whose tomb we have gathered trod down a flourishing world by despising it in their hearts. Life was long, good health endured, material things were in abundance, there were many offspring and tranquillity in long-lasting peace. And yet, even though the world itself was flourishing, in their hearts it had already dried up. You see now a world that has already dried up, but it is still flourishing in our hearts. Everywhere there is strife, everywhere ruin. We are struck from every side, on every side we are filled with bitterness. Yet we blindly love the bitter things brought on from our material desires, we pursue what is passing away, we cling to what is falling. And because we can’t hold on to it, we too are falling along with the things we grasp as they collapse. Once the world held us by its delights. Now it is so full of disasters that the world itself is summoning us to God. Consider the emptiness of things which pass away with time. Let the end of what is temporal show that what can pass away amounts to nothing. Let the fall of things reveal their transitory nature, and that what appeared to be lasting amounts to almost nothing. Consider these things carefully, dearly beloved. Fix your hearts on love of what is eternal, so that when you decline to strive for earthly heights you may attain the glory you grasp by faith. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.