

Readings: Sirach 39:6-10; Hebrew 12:1-4; Matthew 13:44-52

## ST. ANSELM OF CANTERBURY

The patron of our abbey and school, St. Anselm of Canterbury, was a multi-faceted person: a monk, philosopher, theologian, and eventually archbishop of the most important see in England. As archbishop he was twice exiled from that country, for about three years each time, so my main questions for this homily are these: How did he deal with such adversity? And how should we deal with whatever problems and difficulties crop up in our own lives? To answer these questions I will look first at Anselm's own life and will then turn to some persons or groups in our own day. In both respects, the main answer will be the one given in our second reading, from the Letter to the Hebrew, especially in these lines: "Let us rid ourselves of every burden and sin and *persevere* in running the race that lies before us, keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the leader and perfecter of faith." I therefore want to reflect on the importance of perseverance, both in St. Anselm's life and in the lives of others, including our own.

First, it is important to understand why Anselm suffered these exiles in the first place. The brief answer is that he was engaged in serious disputes with one or another of the English kings over their alleged right to be directly involved in matters of church governance. You might feel that this was an issue with a ready-made correct answer: an appropriate separation of church and state. However, things were not so simple. For centuries, especially once Christianity became the official religion of the Roman empire, secular rulers had considerable rights, even to the extent of convening important church councils. For example, the very first ecumenical council, held in the city of Nicea in the fourth century, was convened by Emperor Constantine the Great because he insisted that the leaders of the church had to come to agreement about the issue of the divinity of Christ. A later emperor convened the equally important Council of Chalcedon about a hundred

years later, and for centuries it was also common for emperors or kings to appoint bishops and to bestow on them their episcopal insignia, a practice that goes under the name of “lay investiture.” If this were still practiced, it would be like President Trump calling all of the American bishops to meet and agree on some point of Christian doctrine, or it would be like Mayor Muriel Bowser being the person to bestow the episcopal insignia on Bishop Wilton Gregory when he is installed as our new archbishop on May 21, instead of having Pope Francis’s personal representative, the apostolic nuncio, do so.

Today it would seem very strange to us if the president or mayor had such involvement in church affairs, but for centuries it was common practice. Only gradually was lay investiture seen by the popes as an improper infringement on the rights of the church, but attempts at reform were met with resistance not only by secular rulers but even by some church leaders who were quite comfortable with a traditionally close relationship between church and state. Tensions were especially high during the time of St. Anselm, for Gregory VII, a pope who strenuously opposed lay investiture, was born only thirteen years before our patronal saint, and Pope Gregory’s reform efforts were not universally endorsed. Anselm’s predecessor as archbishop of Canterbury, a man named Lanfranc, had no qualms about lay investiture, so the King Henry I of England, the son of William the Conqueror, expected Anselm to be just as acquiescent as Lanfranc.

This meant that our patron was caught in the middle. We know this from a letter that he sent to the king that included the following words: “With regard to what you say about ... Archbishop Lanfranc, I reply that neither at my baptism nor in any of my ordinations did I promise to observe the law or custom of ... Archbishop Lanfranc but rather the law of God.” So Anselm resisted where Lanfranc had not, and it was this kind of resistance that led to his two long exiles, each under a different king. The steadfastness or perseverance with which he faced

such trials is very clear from another of his letters, this one to Pope Paschal in 1102, where Anselm wrote: “I do not fear exile, poverty, torture or death, for my heart, strengthened in God, is prepared to bear all these for the sake of obedience to the Apostolic See and the liberty of . . . the Church of Christ.”

Not surprisingly, our patron gave the same advice to others, as to the monks of Bury St. Edmunds, to whom he once wrote: “May no adversity hold you back from the service of God, may nothing turn you away from carrying out his will. Remember that all who wish to live a good life in Christ must suffer tribulations. Therefore, the more tribulations rise against you, the more each one of you should occupy himself in the exercise of a holy monastic life.”

In the long run, this fidelity to God is the kind of perseverance that counts the most for any person, but there are other kinds of perseverance that have their own importance and from which we can also learn. Consider the basketball team of the University of Virginia, this year’s national champions. Only one year ago they were perhaps the most humiliated team in the country, because for the first time ever in the history of the NCAA tournament they, a number one seed, lost to a sixteenth seed, the University of Maryland, Baltimore Country (UMBC). Many people wondered if the team would ever recover from such a humiliating, devastating loss. It certainly tempted the coach and his players not even to want to talk about what had happened.

But their coach, Tony Bennett, resisted that temptation and insisted that his players resist it too. So at their first practice of the season just ended, the players showed up in the gym expecting to work hard on shooting, passing, defending, and getting into the best possible physical condition, but instead they were asked to watch a 17-minute video on dealing with adversity, a film brought to Coach Bennett’s attention by his wife. The speaker in that video told a story about how a man had dealt with a crippling injury he had suffered as a child, an injury that had

made many people make fun of him. His mother had said: “When something [bad] happens to you, it sits on top of you like a rock. And if you never tell the story, it sits on you forever. But as you begin to tell the story, you climb out from under that rock and eventually you sit up on top of it.”

Coach Bennett and his players started telling their story. They did not ignore the previous year’s humiliating loss or refuse to talk about it. Instead, they talked about it to others and talked about it among themselves— “talked about being strengthened by the blow that cut us down.” As the coach said, “That loss was so devastating in so many ways that I knew we had to be there for each other. So it was about sitting together, talking, and just working through stuff and battling through it, and trusting each other.” That attitude allowed them to win some incredibly close games in this year’s tournament. I would not say they were destined to win the championship, but they were certainly destined not to fold, not to give up. In words of our second reading, “they persevered in running the race that lay before them.”

I could describe the same kind of perseverance as recently seen in Tiger Woods’ comeback from an even more humiliating situation, one that led to his divorce, but instead I want to conclude by showing that this lesson of perseverance can be seen just as well in the world of the fine arts. Many of you were present here a few weeks ago when we heard a beautiful concert of Mozart sonatas performed by a violinist from Ireland, Mairead Hickey, and a Spanish pianist, Albert Cano Smit. A few days later, the man who had arranged for these two young musicians to come to the United States to give concerts in New York and Washington interviewed Mairead. His last question was on how she, who had been playing the violin since she was three years old, dealt with being considered “a child prodigy.” To this question she gave the following remarkable reply:

I don't like to think of myself as being a child prodigy or somebody special.... Many people who heard me perform my little violin told me that I had special gifts, but those people had no idea that my skill in playing a musical instrument was the direct result of spending many, many hours practicing, taking a lot of music lessons and being given advice and encouragement by my teachers and parents.... When people told me that I was somebody special because of my abilities, that would make me cry. But by the time I had become a teenager I had made a lot of friends with other people as interested in performing music as I. When I was in public school, I found it so boring that I was drawn to practicing music even more diligently because it gave me something to do that I really loved.... I learned early on that if I really wanted to become a professional musician by the time I grew up, I had to practice very hard every day.

So whether it is sports or music or academic research or whatever it is we're engaged in, we should all be strong enough to persevere to the best of our ability. Above all, let that advice apply to the race that counts most of all, the one about which St. Paul wrote to Timothy: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. From now on the crown of righteousness awaits me, which the Lord, the just judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me but to all who have longed for his appearance." (2 Tim. 4:7) That crown of righteousness was given not only to St. Paul but to our patron, St. Anselm. May we so live as to be awarded it one day ourselves.