

Homily
Memorial of Saint John Neumann, Bishop
January 5, 2024

“...it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for one who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” Matthew 19:24

We all are familiar with this passage from Matthew. So, who is rich? There are many ways, subjective ways, to describe a rich person. I'm rich in many ways. My wife and I live a very comfortable life. We need for nothing. Our basic needs are covered. But we aren't 'rich' in the modern western world kind of way. We don't have a vacation home; we don't have luxury cars or a mansion; we don't eat at expensive restaurants, unless some else is paying. We can't afford those things. But we are rich in the sense that what we do have is a lot more than more than 70% of the people in the world, maybe more. Only 21% of the world's adult population have a car.

Today we celebrate the Memorial of Saint John Neumann, the first canonized Bishop in North America. Born in 1811 in what is now the Czech Republic, he studied in Prague and moved to New York at 25 and was ordained a priest. At 29, he joined the Redemptorists and became its first member to profess vows in the United States. He continued missionary work in Maryland, Virginia and Ohio. At 41, as bishop of Philadelphia, he organized the parochial school system into a diocesan one, increasing the number of pupils almost twentyfold within a short time.

He was well-known for his holiness, scholarship, spiritual writing and preaching. He died in 1860 at the age of 48 and became the first American bishop to be beatified in 1963, then canonized in 1977. He is buried in St. Peter the Apostle Church in Philadelphia.

He took a vow of poverty, eschewing as many of his worldly possessions as possible. It is said that when visiting Germany and returning to the house where he was staying, soaked by rain, his host suggested he change his shoes, to which he replied, “The only way I could change my shoes is by putting the left one on the right foot and the right one on the left foot. This is the only pair I own.”

Money and possessions are only tools. The question is, “Do we use the tools entrusted to us for the good of the Body of Christ, or do we let those things run our lives; do we use them for our own benefit?” In other words, do we use things to love God and neighbor or do we love things?

Jesus saw Nathaniel in the shadows under the fig tree and called him to the light. If we focus on Jesus, the Light of Christ, if we align our will to His, we will naturally love Him and our neighbor and we will use the gifts God has given us to facilitate that love, building up the Body of Christ.

There is plenty of evil in the world. Cain belonged to the Evil One. Cain murdered his brother out of hate and envy. We are called to love. This is the real struggle – can we love our neighbor in the face of hate and envy? Can we give of ourselves, sharing our gifts and talents knowing that it may not be received in the love that is it offered, and maybe even rejected and destroyed? And maybe that love is returned with hate, rejection, humiliation and mockery. Yes, we can, just as St. John Newman did, when we follow Christ, remain in His light, and embrace His Sacraments so that we can be healed, encouraged, strengthened and restored until we see Him face to Face in that heavenly kingdom.