

Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time February 5, 2006

INTRODUCTION: (Job 7,1-4.6-7; Mk. 1,29-39)

The book of Job was written about 400-500 years before Christ. At that time the Jews did not know about reward and punishment in the next life. In their view, the spirits of the dead simply dwelled in a place called Sheol, where they were neither happy nor unhappy. Yet the Jews believed that God was fair and just and that God rewarded those who were good and punished those who were evil. Having no concept of happiness or unhappiness in the next life, they could only conclude that good people would be rewarded in this life and bad people would be punished. So, they reasoned that if someone was successful and prosperous, they must be good people because God was rewarding them so generously, and if someone was sick or was suffering in some way, they must be bad people even if their evil deeds were known only by God. But their theology was not reality. Good people do suffer and bad people often get by with murder. That is the issue the book of Job tries to deal with. Job is introduced to us as a genuinely good person (God himself says what a good man he is) and initially he is prosperous and successful in every way. But a number of catastrophes come along that destroy his fortune, his family and his health. Today we hear Job at an extremely low point in his life. If you've never known depression, this is a good description of it. Job's lament prepares us for the gospel where we hear about Jesus saving people from sickness and suffering.

HOMILY

Jesus did not invent the idea of healing people miraculously. When I was visiting Greece several years ago, I stopped to visit an ancient shrine to the Greek god, Asclepius, who, in mythology, was the son of Apollo. It was a place of healing, and hanging on the walls of the shrine were little plaster molds of body parts that people believed Asclepius had healed. The Hebrew Scriptures (a.k.a. the Old Testament) tell us of the healing power of the prophets Elijah and Elisha over 800 years before Christ. But there is no person or no movement or no god in any of the ancient writings who is more associated with healing than Jesus Christ. Healing was as much a part of his ministry as teaching. Indeed his healings were a way of teaching. His healings taught about the power of God, the love of God, the power of faith. His healings were concrete, tangible signs of the hidden spiritual healing and life he came to bring us.

Healing did not stop with Jesus. In the Acts of the Apostles we read how his apostles continued his work of healing. You could almost say that Christianity was as much a religion of healing as it was a religion promising us eternal life if we live a good life. About four hundred years after Christ, St. Augustine, the great theologian, claimed that the time for healings had ceased. He said they were needed in the early Church to help the Church grow, but by his time they were not necessary. Shortly before St. Augustine died, he wrote that he had been wrong about that. As bishop he had witnessed many healings in his own diocese and that God continues to cure people through prayer and through the power of the risen Jesus.

From the beginning, the Church has had a sacrament to pray for the sick but in later centuries it was used only to prepare people for death. The sacrament is based on the words of St. James in his epistle - when someone is sick they should call for the priests of the church and be

anointed with oil. Gratefully, Vatican II restored it to its original purpose of praying for healing. It is still given when a person is near death because it is also a source of spiritual healing, grace and peace.

The age of miracles was not over at the time of St. Augustine and it is not over today. One proof of that is there must be evidence of true miracles attributed to every person who is canonized. Our late pope, John Paul, canonized a lot of people in his pontificate.

I have seen people healed almost immediately through prayer; however, in my experience prayer for healing must be ongoing. If I were Jesus, I could heal everyone in a minute, but I'm not Jesus. I'm more like a 1.5 volt battery trying to do the work of a huge dynamo (Jesus is the dynamo). At the same time, since the sacraments are the actions of Christ, there is a power at work in them that is greater than any power any human person has on their own. The power at work in the sacraments is the power of Christ.

Tonight after Mass I will offer the sacrament of the sick to anyone who wishes to receive it. It is for an illness that is more than just a simple cold, but a person need not wait until they are almost dead in order to ask for it. Like all the sacraments, it must be received with faith trusting that God is definitely present in the sacrament and in some way will touch the person receiving it with gracious love. Let us know also that we have some responsibility for our own health and we must take good care of ourselves and we should see a doctor when we need to. We cannot abuse our bodies by continuing to do things that are unhealthy and expect God to make everything right. As we continue the Mass, let us pray for the health and healing of all our parishioners and their families.

Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time **February 26, 2006**

INTRODUCTION: [*Hosea 2, 16b. 17b. 21-22; II Cor. 3, 1b-6; Mark 2, 18-22*] Our first reading today from the prophet Hosea goes back to a time of great material prosperity in Israel but also great spiritual collapse. God's people had forgotten their God and were ignoring the commandments. The image the prophet uses here is the image of marriage. In this image, God is represented as the faithful husband while Israel is his unfaithful spouse. Israel's unfaithfulness was in turning her affection and adoration to false gods. Although God's people were unfaithful, God would still be faithful. Even if he had to strip them of all their wealth and all their false gods and lead them into a desert, which he would do, he would do so in order to try to win them back to himself.

The reading leads into the gospel where Jesus uses the image of married love to answer a question about fasting. Implied in his answer is that he is the bridegroom, Israel's God.

HOMILY: God uses many different images to describe his love for us. One image God uses frequently is that of marriage. God wants to be close to us and wants us to be close to him in fidelity and joy.

In our gospel, some people, perhaps disciples of John the Baptist and the Pharisees, came to Jesus with a question about fasting. This question was not about the one day of fast that was required by law on the Day of Atonement. What is at issue here was a pious practice that the Pharisees and disciples of John the Baptist had of fasting in anticipation and preparation for the coming of the kingdom of God. Jesus' answer, in effect, was saying that there was no need for his disciples to fast since the kingdom had already come, in Jesus. Using the image of a wedding, Jesus compares himself to a bridegroom, a symbol that God used in the Old Testament for himself. Jesus implies that he is God among us who has come to reveal God's kingdom to us. He went on to tell the people who were questioning him that he would not always be among his people in a way that they could see him. "The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, then they will fast..." In this statement the gospel is telling us that when we fast now, which we are invited to do beginning this Wednesday, it's not for the same reason that the Jews did it, in anticipation and preparation for God's coming to us. The bridegroom, our God, has come to us. We fast and sacrifice now in order to open ourselves more to his presence.

Our spiritual lives go in two directions; on the one hand we are called to celebrate because God is with us in Jesus (and the most perfect way we can celebrate this is in the Eucharist). On the other hand, however, we are required to discipline ourselves and make sacrifices because we know we have a lot of room to grow in order to be closer to our God. And so we have periods like Lent to help us grow and increase in God's love and grace.

There have been times in the past when I had just finished the consecration at Mass. As I looked at the host, I thought how simple this is: just say a few words and such a great miracle occurs; bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ. With just a few words Christ gives himself to all of us as our food and our drink. It seems almost too simple. [And for some it is too simple. They expect God to do things in a more dramatic, a more majestic way and they consequently miss the simple manner by which God chooses to act.] But as I thought of this simple miracle, I thought Christ must really want to be here with us, he must really want to give himself to us - that he made it all so simple.

In using the imagery of marriage in our readings today, God is speaking to us of his love. He is asking for our love. God has shown his love by taking on our flesh, by becoming human like us in every way except sin. He has shown us his love by dying for us, by not giving up on us, even when we give up on ourselves or give up on him. He has shown his love by sharing his Spirit with us and by giving himself to us in the Eucharist. He has shown his love by giving us hope that we will live forever with him in eternal joy if we follow the way he has shown us.

Let us praise his faithfulness and love and ask his help to respond with greater love.