

1st Sunday of Lent

March 1, 2009

INTRODUCTION (Gen. 9, 8-15; I Peter 3, 18-22; Mark 1, 12-15)

A covenant typically is a serious commitment or promise two people make to each other. It defines their relationship and the expectations they have of each other. Except when people get married, the word "covenant" is not often used today. However, before the time of Christ, it was the usual manner by which people, and sometimes nations, entered into binding agreements with one another. It was the way God chose to enter into a relationship with his people. During this season of Lent, the theme of covenant will keep coming up in the weeks to come. Today we hear about the covenant God made with Noah and all creation after the great flood. Notice this covenant is unusual in that God makes all the promises and asks nothing of Noah and his family in return. St. Peter, in the second reading, tells us this covenant prefigured baptism with God promising us salvation and eternal life. As we shall learn in the weeks to come, God does have expectations of us. Whenever we come to Mass, we renew this covenant God has made with us. We are assured of eternal life through Jesus Christ, and we commit ourselves to loving and obeying him.

HOMILY - In Arthur Miller's play, *Death of a Salesman*, the central character is Willy Loman, an aging salesman who has been forced to work only on commission. His meager income can't pay the bills. Yet he refuses to face reality. He struggles to keep the illusion that he is highly successful and greatly loved by all his customers. Eventually he loses his job and decides to end his life, which he does. His son said of his father, "he never knew who he really was."

Who are we? Answering who we are is often best answered when we know what we are looking for in life? What do we want most out of life? I've just finished reading a wonderful book: *The Seven Storey Mountain* by Thomas Merton. Thomas Merton grew up pretty much without any relationship with God. He struggled to find happiness and peace in life but couldn't seem to find it anywhere, not until he found his way into the Catholic Church and ultimately to the Trappist Monastery near Bardstown, Kentucky. He found himself, he found who he was, in finding God.

I am reminded of a retreat I made about 30 years ago. It was a guided retreat where I met with the retreat master for an hour every day. The retreat master asked me to reflect on the question "What do you want most in life?" Being younger as I was, my answer to myself was immediate: I thought I would be happiest if I could have a beautiful, young, loving wife (maybe rich too!). Even as a priest I couldn't help envying couples I would happen to see together, wishing I could have been the one holding hands with the loving wife. It seemed like the right answer to the question, "What do you want most in life?" But the question continued to reassert itself throughout the three days of retreat, continued to seek an answer as if it had not been answered at all. On the last day of retreat, I was praying in church. Looking deep into my soul, I discovered the real answer to that question, an answer that gave me the greatest peace, a peace that has held up in almost all the difficulties I've faced since then. The real answer to the question, "what do I want most in life?" was "to be and to do whatever God wanted of me." I

realized if I did that, my life would be a success. That peace was tested and demonstrated itself almost immediately. When I left the church, apparently there was a couples' retreat going on at the retreat house, and lots of couples were walking around talking and holding hands. I felt very peaceful about it, watching them, happy for them and not feeling any envy at all, or wishing I were anything other than what I was. The natural yearning for love and companionship and intimacy didn't disappear that day, but I experienced a new peace in dealing with it.

What was Jesus doing in the desert? He didn't need to do penance for any misdeeds. Perhaps he was asking himself the same questions: Who am I? What do I want in life? What does God, the Father, want of me?

The next forty days invite us to our own time of retreat. Maybe we can't get away for a few days, but maybe we can find some way to ask ourself, what am I looking for in life? What are the temptations that keep me from knowing God better, knowing myself better? Jesus tells us: "The kingdom of God is at hand." It's right in front of us, if we only have eyes to see and ears to hear.

2nd Sunday of Lent

March 8, 2009

INTRODUCTION: Last week we heard about God's covenant with Noah. Another important covenant is implied in today's first reading - God's covenant with Abraham. God promised Abraham numerous blessings, including many descendants. In return, God asked Abraham simply to trust him. Today we hear how Abraham remained trusting in a most difficult situation. Abraham must have felt great anguish when he sensed God was asking him to sacrifice his beloved son, Isaac. I often wonder if God really asked this of Abraham or if Abraham just thought God was asking this of him. Human sacrifice was common in many cultures, including that of Abraham's closest neighbors, so it was natural that Abraham may have thought he should make this kind of sacrifice just as others were doing.

HOMILY: One cold winter evening a priest was walking through a dangerous neighborhood. A man hiding in the shadows didn't recognize him as a priest because the priest had his topcoat buttoned up to his chin. The man came out of the shadows with a gun and asked the priest to give him his wallet. When the priest opened his coat to get it, the man with the gun saw his Roman collar and apologized. He said "Sorry Father, I didn't know you were a priest. I can't steal from you. Just go on your way." The priest was so relieved he reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a cigar. He said "Thank you my good man. Let me give you a cigar." The robber said "I appreciate that Father, but I can't take it. I gave up smoking for Lent."

Well, the obvious point is that whatever spiritual practice we choose to take on during Lent, it is supposed to change us, it is supposed to make us better people. Changes come in many ways. Some are good, some are not. Some are gradual, some occur with amazing speed. Today's

readings deal with the most profound change any human will ever face: the end of life in this world and the beginning of life in the next. Did you notice how the themes of death and life are part of each of today's readings?

Abraham's son Isaac came within seconds of having his life taken from him, but he was spared. His having been spared was like a resurrection for him. Abraham's relief in his son's remaining alive would have been enormous.

St. Paul reminds us that Jesus' death and resurrection is an assurance of God's love.

In the gospel, Jesus' transfiguration is not only a revelation of divine glory hidden in Jesus, but the transfiguration is closely tied to Jesus' death and resurrection. If you go to St. Mark's gospel and read the passage immediately preceding the account of the transfiguration, you will see that right before Jesus went up the mountain, Jesus warned his apostles that he would be put to death and would rise again. Immediately after the event, when coming down from the mountain, he tells Peter, James and John, who were with him during the transfiguration, not to tell anyone what they had experienced until he had risen from the dead.

Our season of Lent prepares us to celebrate again what Jesus has done for us in his death and resurrection. We are called to enter into new life with him now so that when our time comes we can enter fully into his glory. Some day, as Jesus was changed, we too will be changed if we remain in union with him. If we continue to share in his life through faith, when we lay aside this present life with its joys and sorrows, its triumphs and its weaknesses, we will enter into a glorious new world which Jesus has opened up to us. We too will be transfigured. Amen.

3rd Sunday of Lent

March 15, 2009

INTRODUCTION: [Exodus 20, 1-17; I Cor. 1, 22-25; John 2, 13-25] Covenant is a theme that keeps recurring in our first reading these Sundays of Lent. The first Sunday of Lent we hear about God's covenant with Noah. Last Sunday we heard about God's covenant with Abraham and how Abraham's trust in God was tested when he heard God tell him to sacrifice his son. Today, the third Sunday of Lent, we hear about God's covenant with his people as they traveled under the leadership of Moses from slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land. God, for his part of the covenant, promised his people liberty, land, prosperity and his special care and love. Today's first reading tells us what God expected of them in return.

HOMILY: I want to draw for you a mental picture of what Jerusalem looked like at the time of Jesus during the Passover celebration. At that time the activities at the Temple were the year's major event: religiously, culturally and economically for all of Israel, especially for Jerusalem. Jews came to Jerusalem from all over the world at Passover. Josephus, the Jewish historian,

may be exaggerating when he says over 250,000 Passover victims - oxen, sheep and doves - were sacrificed during Passover, but certainly the figure ran into many thousands. (Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus, Joachim Jeremias, pg. 57). The Law required that the animals for sacrifice be perfect. Since people came from distant places, which would have been burdensome to bring an animal with them, not to mention risking the possibility their animal would be rejected because it had some imperfection, it was expedient that the great majority of the animals be sold in Jerusalem. With only one place to buy what they needed, they would get no bargains. Are you beginning to get a picture of something like a county fair with people packed together coming and going, moving along with thousands of oxen and sheep, or carrying doves in little birdcages. The high priestly family may have been in on this business big time. Josephus described the High Priest Ananias as "the great procurer of money." (ibidem, pg 49) On top of all this there were the moneychangers.

The law required that people purchase their sacrifice with Jewish currency. Roman coins were considered idolatrous because they were engraved with pagan inscriptions and images. Since the Jews were under Roman occupation, they probably had to use Roman currency in their everyday lives. So when people came to Jerusalem and they wanted to buy an animal for sacrifice, they had to exchange their foreign money for Jewish currency. Thus we have the moneychangers. One wonders how much profiteering was happening as the exchange was made.

Aside from any cheating or dishonesty, there were those who were getting quite wealthy in the name of God. Jesus told the Jewish leaders who challenged him for doing what he did: "you have made it (the Temple) a den of thieves." We sometimes wonder why Jesus reacted so violently in this instance. We see him nowhere else in the Scriptures expressing such anger. Quite possibly he was angry at seeing how poor people coming to worship God were being ripped off. The gospels give us another reason too for his anger as they recalled the psalm verse: "Zeal for your house will consume me." Obviously he placed worship of God much more highly than most people do. We all know how easy it is to become careless in our reverence and devotion to our Heavenly Father. Often God gets put in second place, or even further down in our list of priorities. It was not that way with Jesus. His Heavenly Father always took first place with him.

We heard the Commandments in our first reading. Notice they are not suggestions or recommendations. They are spoken by one who speaks with authority. Notice that our obligations to God are placed at the top of the list. Is that because God is in need of our worship? No, it's just putting things in perspective. If we value our relationship with God, everything else falls into place. When God is forgotten, then we have no anchor, no ground on which to base our morality, no one to whom we are accountable. We make up our own rules; we make ourselves into our own gods. That's where Adam and Eve got into trouble; they wanted to make themselves equal to God and make their own rules. That is how they lost the happiness God initially gave them.

The commandments and the cleansing of the Temple might prompt us today on this third

Sunday of Lent to reflect on our own relationship with God. We call him Lord. Do our lives show that we believe what we say?

5th Sunday of Lent

March 29, 2009

INTRODUCTION: [Jeremiah 31,31-35; Hebrews 5,7-9; John 12,20-33]

The prophet Jeremiah lived 600 years before Christ. He was sent by God to mercifully warn God's people that they were living on the edge of catastrophe. If they didn't start following God's ways the Babylonians would invade their land and destroy them. Centuries of wanton idolatry and social injustice had seriously demoralized and weakened God's people. If they followed what God was telling them through Jeremiah they could avoid disaster. Of course, they ignored Jeremiah and punished him for his message. Today's first reading comes shortly before the Babylonian invasion. God speaks, through Jeremiah, that he is gravely disappointed with the way God's people continually violated the covenant they made with God at Mt. Sinai, a covenant Moses solemnly sealed in blood centuries earlier. In spite of their unfaithfulness, God still loved his people and would make a new covenant with them. Six hundred years later, Jesus used these words "new covenant" when he gave the cup of his blood to his apostles at the Last Supper. We renew that covenant with him each time we come to Mass.

HOMILY: Today's gospel is from John chapter 12, verses 20 to 33. If you would look at verse 1 of this chapter, John tells us it was six days before Passover and Jesus had just arrived in Bethany, a little town located on the Mount of Olives just across the Kidron valley from Jerusalem. Jesus was going there to celebrate Passover that year, just as thousands of other Jews were doing. That year Passover began on Friday evening, so six days before meant Jesus arrived in Bethany sometime on Saturday. Some of his friends, including Martha, Mary, and Lazarus, prepared a dinner for him - not necessarily at their home. It would have to have been a big dinner – remember Jesus had 12 apostles with him. Lazarus, some time before as you know, had been raised from the dead by Jesus, an event that led many Jews to believe in Jesus. While at this dinner, Mary anointed Jesus' feet with expensive perfume. Judas registered a complaint that the gesture was wasteful and the perfume should have been sold so the proceeds could have been given to the poor. Judas, John tells us, was the treasurer for the group and he didn't care for the poor but used to steal from the money with which he had been entrusted. Jesus told Judas to "leave her alone. She did it in preparation for my burial." And, indeed, Jesus would be buried before the week was over.

John tells us that the next day, which would have been the first day of the week, news got around that Jesus was going into Jerusalem just a couple of miles from where he was in Bethany. When a crowd heard he was going into the city, they met him with palm branches singing "Hosanna. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." The Pharisees remarked to each other: "We cannot win! Look the whole world has gone after him." Although we won't

commemorate Palm Sunday until next week, I wanted to mention this because the anointing at Bethany and the triumphal entry into Jerusalem immediately preceded today's gospel and are connected with it, especially the theme of Jesus' death. After the Pharisees commented that the whole world has gone after him, John tells us it's true. Some Greeks showed up wanting to see Jesus and that's where today's gospel begins.

Most scripture scholars believe that it was after Jesus entered Jerusalem on this occasion that he drove the merchants and money-changers out of the Temple. That's where Matthew, Mark and Luke place the cleansing of the temple in their gospels. But John had already told us about that incident earlier in his gospel, so he does not mention it here. Instead, when these Greek worshippers sought to see Jesus, Jesus saw this as a sign that his hour had come. "Hour" is a key word in John. It described the time he would complete his mission here on earth. It was the time when he would be put to death for faithfully fulfilling his work of teaching, healing, forgiving sins and spreading God's love. It was the time when Jesus would be raised up, both on the cross and in the resurrection, a time when God would manifest to the utmost his presence in his Son.

Today's gospel is Jesus' own reflection on his death. Being human it is not something he wants to go through. "I am troubled now," he says. The Greek word used here does not mean something like a mother telling her children "I am troubled when you don't come when I call you." The Greek word means to experience inward turmoil, to be stirred up, disturbed, unsettled, thrown into confusion. He wonders aloud if he should say: "Father, save me from this hour." If he escaped or ran away, he would abandon all that he had done and all he came to do and his good works would be forgotten forever. He had to face this hour so that he could be glorified and God would be glorified in him. Here the word "glory" does not mean Jesus was looking for human praise. "Glory" in the scriptures means a special revelation of God's presence. It means that he would save us through his death, resurrection and ascension. Jesus gave us an example to help us understand how his death would lead to our salvation. Like a seed must die in order to produce a new growth, so through Jesus' death, resurrection and return to the Father new life would come forth in those who have followed him. He tells us, "where I am, there also will my servant be." We will all face death, but following him involves another kind of death, death to selfishness and sin, and maybe even martyrdom. But death to ourselves will lead to life eternal. As Jesus prays for the strength to get through the ordeal ahead and thus give glory to the Father by fulfilling his mission, God the Father's voice is heard. The Father's words give testimony about Jesus. The gospel ends on a note of hope, for this will be a time of judgment for the world. This means it will look as if evil has won with Jesus' death. But Christ's glorification will put an end to the power of evil in this world. (Incidentally I read once this is the idea behind April fools day: it's association with Easter. When Jesus rose, the devil, who thought he got rid of Jesus was made to look a fool.) Evil will not triumph. Jesus will win in the end. We need to keep this optimism in trying times and know that in Jesus is our hope and our life. Amen.