

Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time - A Cycle

August 7, 2011

INTRODUCTION: Our first reading today takes us back roughly 860 years before Christ. It was the time of Elijah the prophet. Ahaz was king in Israel, but the real power behind the throne was the infamous Queen Jezebel. Jezebel was an impassioned promoter of paganism of the worship of the Canaanite god Baal. Elijah, of course, was just as passionate in trying to keep God's people faithful to the God of Israel. So you might imagine they would clash and they did. Elijah challenged all the prophets of Baal to a contest on Mt. Carmel which ended in Elijah's victory and the annihilation of all the pagan prophets. Certainly Christ would not have handled it the way Elijah did, but Christ wouldn't be born for another eight and a half centuries. In spite of the obvious outcome of the contest, which proved Israel's God was the true God, Jezebel was furious and vowed blood vengeance on Elijah. To save his life, Elijah fled from Israel to Mt. Horeb in Sinai, the very same place where Moses gave Israel the Ten Commandments and where God made a covenant with Israel. There Elijah heard God's voice, not in dramatic natural phenomena, but in the silence of his heart.

HOMILY: A doctor phoned his patient one afternoon and told him: "I have some bad news and some worse news. The bad news is that all your tests show you have 24 hours to live." The patient said, "What could be worse than that?" The doc answered, "I've been trying to reach you since yesterday."

Pope John Paul II became pope in October, 1978. There was lots of bad news then. The cold war was threatening world peace. Modern culture was destroying traditional social and moral values. Priests and nuns were abandoning their vocations in huge numbers. Conservatives and liberals were battling over the implementation of Vatican II. His message to the Church and the world at the beginning of his long pontificate are the words we hear in today's gospel: "Be not afraid."

Fear, of course, is a healthy thing when it motivates us to protect ourselves from some threat to the wellbeing of ourselves or of those we love. Fear stimulates us emotionally to prepare for fight or flight. But a lot of people are consumed by fears that are groundless, irrational, or certain things we can do nothing about except pray.

In last week's gospel, we heard about Jesus miraculously feeding over 5000 people with five loaves of bread and two fish. Matthew immediately follows that gospel with today's gospel. The miraculous feeding took place on the sea of Galilee. Jesus made the disciples get into a boat and he went off to the hills alone to pray. Matthew leaves us to wonder why Jesus acted this way. St. John fills in some of the details. John tells us that after the crowd had seen what Jesus did in healing the sick and feeding all of them, they decided they were going to make him their king. As king, he would be their liberator and savior. He would raise an army and drive the Romans out of Israel and Judea. He would rule them, maybe even fulfill every need they had. Jesus knew that's not what the Father sent him to do. As savior he had much greater things to

offer them than freedom from the powers of Rome and free meals. So Jesus sent the Apostles away because he knew they would be particularly excited over the prospect of Jesus taking over as king. Some of them already imagined themselves having important places in Jesus' kingdom. So he sent them off, away from the crowd, dismissed the crowd himself and went off alone to pray.

The story of Jesus walking on the water is an unusual miracle. Usually when Jesus worked a miracle, he was responding to someone's needs: hunger, sickness, evil spirit possession, storms on the sea. Jesus walking on the water is simply a manifestation of his divine nature. There are numerous references in the Old Testament to God walking on the water or the sea. Seeing him approaching them, the Apostles panicked and Jesus said: "take courage, it is I, be not afraid." "It is I" is an important part of this gospel because it gives greater clarity about what this event meant. It could mean, "it's just me." But it is also in Greek the name that God gave Moses when Moses wanted to know God's name: "I am," or "I am who I am." "??? ?????." All Jews knew this sacred name but no one ever pronounced it except the High Priest once a year in the Holy of Holies. Why does Jesus wish to reveal himself in this way? First of all it is important to note that in all three gospels that tell the story of Jesus walking on water, it immediately follows the story of the miraculous feeding and is linked to it. If you remember last week, the miraculous feeding anticipated the Eucharist in that it tells us Jesus took bread, blessed it, broke it and gave it. These are the same verbs used at the Last Supper in the account of the institution of the Eucharist. The Eucharistic symbolism that begins with the miracle of the feeding continues into the story of walking on the water. There we have the Apostles struggling in the night, with the wind against them, feeling as if they were making no progress. Suddenly Jesus assures them of his presence. He would not desert them. You might recall his words at the Last Supper: "I will not leave you orphans". He brings courage and calms their fears by announcing his presence, which he will also do for us, and which he especially does in the Eucharist when he tells us: "this is my body," "this is my blood."

Matthew joins a story about Peter to his account of Jesus walking on the water. It points out the special position of Peter as do many other passages in the New Testament. It also shows Peter that, with Christ's bidding and with his help, Peter would be able to do amazing things. So can any of us when our Lord invites us to follow him and is there to hold us up. I can't say how many times the presence, especially in the Eucharist, strengthened me and helped me in difficult times. So he is with us now at Mass today telling us as he told the Apostles: "be not afraid." Amen.

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time - A Cycle

August 28, 2011

INTRODUCTION: (Jeremiah 20, 7-9) Our first reading from the prophet Jeremiah goes back to 600 B.C. It sounds as if Jeremiah thought that when God called him to be a prophet, it would be an easy job. But the people who heard God's message only hated Jeremiah for what he

preached. They ridiculed him, threw him in jail and even tried to kill him. We hear him complaining to God, "You duped me! You tricked me, God!"

Jesus' faithfulness to his mission would bring him suffering too, but Jesus did not complain or feel duped. He was well aware of what was going to happen. In today's gospel, we hear him warning his disciples ahead of time.

HOMILY: (Matthew 16, 21-27) I don't know where I saw this and I'm not sure who said it, but some wit said: "If anyone should doubt whether this is truly the land of promise, they should show up around election time." Politicians promise all the good things they will do for us. You would never hear a politician say, like Jesus did in today's gospel, "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross and follow me."

Most of us are like Peter in today's reading. We are happy to hear about the peace, love and joy that our faith can bring us, and it can, but we don't want to hear about the cross. If you remember last Sunday's gospel, Jesus asks the Apostles, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter makes a profound act of faith when he says, "You are the Christ (the Messiah, the Savior). You are the Son of the living God." Then Jesus told the Apostles what being the messiah would involve. He would suffer greatly, be killed and on the third day be raised. Peter objected. He didn't want to hear any of that negative stuff. Jesus refused to back down from Peter's objections. On the contrary, Jesus predicted suffering for his followers too, "whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross and follow me."

Jesus used some of the strongest language in rebuking Peter that we hear anywhere in the gospels: "Get behind me, Satan." He wasn't saying Peter was an evil person, he was saying Peter was doing the work of Satan, being a tempter, trying to talk Jesus out of his mission, part of which involved rejection and suffering. Jesus knew the Scriptures and the history of God's people better than Peter and he knew what happened to prophets whose mission was to preach God's word, such as Jeremiah whom we hear in the first reading and John the Baptist, Jesus' cousin, who had just been beheaded by Herod. We cannot be too critical of Peter, however, for we have the advantage of hindsight and we know that what Jesus went through had a happy ending with the resurrection. Jesus' being raised on the third day would have been beyond Peter's ability to comprehend. It would have been too much for us to understand, too, if we had been there.

Jesus said "whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross and follow me." It's a wonder that anyone decided to follow Jesus when he talked like that. The cross, whether it was a wooden one as it was for Jesus, or some other form of martyrdom, has been real for many of Christ's followers throughout the centuries. For those like us who are not in immediate danger of being persecuted for our faith, carrying the cross involved the day to day effort to overcome our selfishness and to love God with our whole heart and soul, mind and strength and to love our neighbor as ourselves. The cross is for most of us, as St. Paul says in today's second reading, (Romans 12,1-2) "offering ourselves as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God."

Jesus came to establish God's kingdom, a kingdom where God would "wipe away every tear from our eyes, where there would be no more death or mourning, wailing or pain" (Revelation 21,4). Jesus didn't come to us to tell us it is good to have to suffer, he came to bring us a better world; he healed the sick, he drove out demons, he told people to help the poor. Suffering for its own sake is never any good. It's a reasonable thing to do what we can to try to alleviate it. But there are some crosses, some sufferings we cannot avoid. They are part of our journey to God. There are also those crosses we may have to bear that are part of our responsibility or our vocation of caring for others, crosses that sometimes parents have to endure, or religious or missionaries or adult children of aged parents, or they are the crosses that are part of our jobs like teachers or firemen or service men and women or whatever; those are the crosses that bring us closer to our Lord who carried a cross for us.

When we come to Mass we recall Jesus' love for us and the sacrifice he made for us. It is especially here that he gives us the strength to follow him and to offer ourselves as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, our spiritual worship. Amen.