

Nineteenth Ordinary – A Cycle

August 7, 2005

INTRODUCTION: Our first reading today takes us back roughly 860 years before Christ. The wicked Queen Jezebel was reigning in Israel at that time. The prophet Elijah was living in Israel at that time too. Jezebel was trying to lead God's people into paganism and Elijah was trying to keep them faithful to God. So there was conflict between them. She decided to have Elijah killed, and to save his life he had to get out of Israel. He fled to Mount Sinai. That was the place where God made a covenant with Israel and where he gave Moses the Ten Commandments four centuries earlier. When God spoke to Moses and the people who were fleeing Egypt, God spoke in thunder and lightning and earthquake. Elijah did not experience God in such powerful natural events but rather heard God in the silence of the desert.

HOMILY: The story of the Jews leaving Egypt and meeting God at Mt. Sinai tells us of a God who controls the forces of nature. They tell us of the fire and earthquake and thunder when God spoke to them on Mt. Sinai. Jesus too shows his power over the forces of nature when he walks on the water. Sometimes God communicates with us in a way that is powerful and unmistakable. It may not be in thunder and earthquake that God speaks to us. He may speak to us through a special healing or some prayer answered that we never thought possible. Those moments are worth treasuring. They are important to hold onto and remember when it seems God is quiet, for one of God's favorite ways of communicating with us is in silence. Like the prophet Elijah, we often need to discover God in the depth of our own hearts. And when we do find him there, we find him in dozens of other places too, which include the Scriptures and the Sacraments - especially the Eucharist.

In preparing my homily, I came across an interesting reflection on today's readings written by Fr. Grassi, a priest I met in Chicago a few years ago when I was there for a wedding. He said one of the most familiar nicknames for his city of Chicago is the "windy city." Most people think this name comes from the sometimes very strong winds that

blow into the city from Lake Michigan. But, he said, Chicago was dubbed the “windy city” because of its history of long-winded politicians who would promise citizens everything and give them very little in actuality.

He applied this to the Church. Currently people have deep concerns about the church. There is no doubt there are some serious problems. Many people are self-appointed experts on just about every problem in the Church and every facet of church life. But sometimes all their talking can get in the way of living out the gospel of Jesus.

Perhaps the readings for today are telling us not to be so “windy.” After all Elijah finds God not in the strong wind, but in a tiny whisper. The wind scares the apostles to the point where Peter almost drowns and needs Jesus to save him. Then Jesus calms the winds. Certainly there has to be communication, there has to be instruction and clarification. But there has to be silence too. Fr. Grassi concluded: maybe if we talked less and listened more it would be better for us and for the church. On that note I thought I would follow my own advice today and say: Amen.

20th Sunday in Ordinary Time– A Cycle

August 14, 2005

INTRODUCTION - The theme for today’s liturgy is expressed in the psalm refrain: “O God, let all the nations praise you.”

Today’s first reading may sound fairly ordinary and unexciting to us but for its time it was very radical. The Jews as God’s “chosen people” felt they had a major, if not exclusive, claim on God’s love and favor. Not only did they consider themselves holier than all the rest of the world, but there were strict class distinctions among themselves. For example, when they went to the temple, those who were allowed to come closest to the altar were the priests, the next closest area was the area for men, then there was the women’s court, then, furthest from the altar was where the Gentiles were allowed to go. Gentiles would be stoned to death if they went beyond their area and stepped into the area reserved for Jews. Here’s the radical part in today’s first reading, written four or five hundred years before Christ: the prophet declares that foreigners (Gentiles), who were willing to

obey God's covenant and who observed the sabbath, could worship in the temple and even minister there. The prophet proclaims that faith in Yahweh is meant to be a saving grace, not only for Israel, but for all the world.

This reading prepares us for the gospel where Jesus goes beyond the bounds of ministering to his own people to help a pagan woman.

In the second reading, from Paul's letter to the Romans, Paul laments the fact that the chosen people, by and large, have rejected Jesus as their Messiah and Savior. He sees great blessings coming upon the world if and when they ever accept Christ.

HOMILY - A woman of faith came home one evening from church services and encountered a robber in her house busy taking her things. Being a person of deep faith who constantly read the Scriptures, she yelled at him: "Stop! Acts 2,38." In case you forgot what is written in Acts 2,38, it tells us, "Repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven." When he heard this, the burglar stopped in his tracks. The woman calmly called the police and told them what was happening. When the police came they were surprised the robber was still there. As they handcuffed him they asked him, "how did a simple Scripture reference get you to stay here and wait for us to get here." He said "Scripture? I thought she said she had an axe and two 38's!" However the woman, being a woman of faith, was not surprised at all. She knew that faith would get her through. So did the woman in today's gospel. Jesus told her: "O woman, great is your faith."

Today's gospel presents us with an image of Jesus that we are not used to or comfortable with. A poor woman asks Jesus for a favor, and he not only ignores her, but he even seems to insult her. What was Jesus thinking? Was he: 1) testing her faith, 2) so preoccupied with his primary mission to the Jewish people that he couldn't deal with anything else, 3) reflecting the cultural prejudices of his race or 4) just being playful? After all, "dog" does not always mean something bad. In other sermons I've mentioned my roommate in the seminary who looked at himself in the mirror every morning when he got up and said "Oh! You handsome dog you!" His good looks was exceeded only by his humility! Looking at today's gospel from Jesus' side we'll never understand why he treated her like he did because we do not have the benefit of facial expressions, gestures, inflections and tone of voice, which convey as much meaning as words themselves.

Let us then look at today's gospel from the point of view of our own reaction to it.

Why are we so uncomfortable with it? Is it because we think Jesus or God should never say “no” to us. Is it because we think he should answer every reasonable request? Is it because God should not force us to keep asking? Whether we are aware of it or not, we all have our expectations of how we think God should act. And sometimes he doesn’t fit those expectations. How many times have we ourselves felt like this woman, that God was ignoring us, blowing us off, or even offensively telling us to “go away?” And what do we do when he says “no”? Do we keep on asking, like this woman of faith, do we get angry and never speak to him again, or do we, with a peaceful spirit, say “whatever you want, Lord.” Sometimes we do have to say “thy will be done,” but other times Jesus encourages us not to give up praying. “Keep asking, keep knocking” he has told us in some of his parables. Today’s gospel is a good example of faith and perseverance in prayer. It also strikes me as a good example of praying to the saints and asking other people to pray for us. Notice that the woman went to the apostles and petitioned them to help get Jesus to respond to her need. And it worked! When they began complaining to him, he couldn’t ignore her any more. We don’t understand the dynamics of prayer, but Jesus said there is great power in united prayer. He told us “if two of you agree on earth about anything for which they are to pray, it shall be granted to them by my heavenly Father.” (Mt. 18,19)

My own personal opinion of what was happening in today’s gospel is that Jesus was tired. How many times have any of us said: “I simply can’t do one more thing.” St. Paul tells us he was like us in every way, except sin. But now he is risen. He is not limited in time or energy. And he does not limit himself to **certain** people. His heart is open to **all** people and his blood was shed for **all** of us. We are reminded of this everyday when we repeat the words of Jesus over the chalice “This is the cup of my blood, the blood of the new and everlasting covenant. It will be shed for you and for **all** so that sins may be forgiven.” Even when our faith is tested, God is still with us. He wants us not to lose faith in him under any circumstances, for in the end our faith will always be rewarded.

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time
August 21, 2005

INTRODUCTION – (*Isaiah 22, 19-23; Matthew 16, 13-20*) Shebna was a powerful man in the court of King Hezekiah in Judah, 700 years before Christ. He was like the vice president, Prime Minister, chief of staff and advisor to the king all wrapped in one. But he was taking advantage of his position and power to step on innocent people and to make himself filthy rich. It didn’t work and he had to be replaced. The only reason this strange little passage was selected was because of

the reference to the key of the House of David. A key has always been a symbol of authority and Shebna's authority would be given over to another person, Eliakim who would use it with integrity. Our first reading connects with the gospel where Jesus promises he would give Peter the keys to the kingdom of heaven.

HOMILY - A man loved a young girl who just didn't want to marry him. Day after day he would write her love letters trying to change her mind. After many months his persistence got results: the girl he loved got engaged...to the mailman who delivered the letters. That's the risk one takes in sending someone else to do a job.

A similar happening is described in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem: The Courtship of Miles Standish. Miles Standish was infatuated with the lovely Pricilla and he sent his friend John Alden to be his spokesman and to tell her of his great love. Surely you remember her famous statement: "Why don't you speak for yourself, John?"

Today's gospel presents Jesus telling Peter to take charge of his Church. It is worth mentioning that by the time Matthew wrote his gospel, Peter had been martyred, so if the role Jesus was giving Peter was merely personal, there would have been no reason to make an issue of it as Matthew did. It was a role that was meant to be carried on by Peter's successors. We know from other places in the gospel that although Peter and his successors had the primary role of taking charge of the Church, the job of carrying on Jesus' ministry was not his alone. Some are ordained to a specific form of leadership, but everyone shares in Christ's work through the sacrament of Confirmation. Jesus knew the risks but he chose to honor us anyway with the privilege of sharing in his work. We pray we won't let him down. Sister Alacoque is here with us today and will tell us at the end of Mass how her community is engaged in the mission of Christ and how we can help.

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time August 28, 2005

INTRODUCTION: (*Jeremiah 20, 7-9*) Our first reading goes back about 600 B.C. The author of our passage is the prophet Jeremiah. Apparently he thought that people would be grateful to him for speaking God's word to them. But his job of telling them to change their ways and get right with God only made them hate him. The people 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!" I'm sure it wasn't the first time God heard the complaint that life is not fair. Jesus' faithfulness to his mission would bring him

suffering too, but Jesus was well aware of what was going to happen to him as we hear him warn his disciples in today's gospel. In last Sunday's gospel Jesus praised Peter for acknowledging Jesus as the Messiah. Jesus even promised Peter the keys to the kingdom of heaven. But Peter wasn't ready for all this talk about suffering and when Peter tried to talk Jesus out of the idea Jesus called him Satan. That's because Peter was trying to tempt Jesus away from being faithful to his calling.

HOMILY: (*Matthew 16, 21-27*) Jesus tells us "whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me." At the time St. Matthew was writing, this was literally true for many Christians. It still happens in some parts of the world that those who believe in Christ and follow him end up paying for it with their lives. Do not misunderstand Jesus' statement. When Jesus said "whoever wishes to come after me must take up his cross and follow me," that does not mean that if we decide not to follow him we're not going to have any problems or crosses. If we choose not to follow him in order to avoid the difficulties that might be demanded of us, problems will find us anyway. Problems and crosses are part of **everyone's** life, whether they believe in Christ or not. And since Christ came to show us the way to peace and joy, avoiding the hardships involved with following him will only cost us more dearly in the long run.

Religion and philosophy have always tried to understand the mystery of suffering, especially the difficult problem of why good people suffer. So many different explanations are out there. **None** of them can take all the mystery out of suffering. For me, the best answer is found in the gospel. Jesus through his cross and resurrection has given us hope in our pain and hopelessness and has shown us suffering can lead to glory, **if** we will accept our crosses along with him. That requires total faith in him. Now Peter, whom we heard in today's gospel, had faith in Jesus. If you recall last week's gospel he said of Jesus: "you are the Christ, the Son of the living God." That profession of faith was made just minutes before the scene in today's gospel. When Jesus began talking about suffering Peter objected. Peter professed that he believed in Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ, but Peter didn't think the Messiah should have to suffer. Peter had Jesus' career path all figured out. Peter's faith in Jesus was way too limited. He couldn't see what Jesus was seeing and was trying to tell them. He couldn't see that if Jesus was determined to be faithful to his mission of teaching and healing, which he was, being faithful would cost him his life. Jesus scolded Peter and called him Satan because he was trying to tempt Jesus away from faithfully staying with his calling. Jesus told him: "you are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do."

That sounds almost unfair of Jesus to say: "You're thinking not as God does!" How are we expected to think like God thinks? If we tried really hard, do you suppose we could? With only our human brains to think with, we can only think like human beings do. But there is something that helps us think like God does. It's faith! Faith enables us

to go beyond our own limited human capabilities. It's just like learning from any great teacher, when God tells us something and we truly believe it, we're seeing things and knowing things God sees and knows, even if we can't fully grasp everything at once. We're beginning to think like God does. *Now I interrupt this homily for a brief commercial.*

If we are grateful to have the faith and hope in Christ that we have, isn't this something we would like to share? One way we do this is through our RCIA program which begins this Wednesday evening. Everyone who has gone through our RCIA reports having enjoyed it. If you know anyone who might be interested in knowing more about Christ and the Church, please invite them or better yet, come with them. In a similar vein, we still have room in our school for some more students. All our children receive an excellent education as well as an education about Jesus Christ and his teachings, whether they are Catholic or not. We have a great principal and a great staff. And if a family needs help with tuition there is a very good possibility of getting it. *End of commercial.*

Coming to Mass, as we are doing now, teaches us to think as God does. We listen to what he tells us in the Scriptures. And we celebrate in a mysterious way Jesus' death and resurrection. In that event we are given a vision of God's plan for all who live in his grace. Amen.