

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.

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time ***September 11, 2005***

(Sirach 27, 30 – 28,7) (Mt. 18, 21-35) I welcome the classes of '43, '44, '45, and '46. I am grateful my friend and cousin, Fr. Don McCarthy, who was in the class of '43, could join us this evening to concelebrate the Mass. Today is Stewardship Sunday throughout the Archdiocese, and you probably wouldn't feel at home here if I didn't talk about money. Well, I do want to say something later on, but I'm not really ready to give a full-fledged Steward talk this weekend. We still have some things to talk about at Parish Pastoral Council before I can address that topic, so you're all lucky this year, because you won't hear a big sermon on money here and you'll probably miss it at your own parish. In

place of that, I do have a little story to make you feel at home. One of our parishioners told me this story the other day. She does not want to be identified. She told me one Sunday Msgr. Schwartz was giving a very long sermon. She was three years old at the time and with the usual innocence of childhood she asked her mother in a fairly audible voice: "Is he going to talk all day?" The people around her didn't dare laugh, but a lot of them were smiling. She said he finished up his sermon rather quickly after that. I'll try not to do the same to everyone today. As George Burns said: "The secret of a good sermon is to have a good beginning and a good ending; and have the two as close together as possible."

The theme of our readings is on forgiveness. Reading the paper each day shows us what unforgiveness does to nations, as they keep trying to get revenge on one another for some real or imagined act of cruelty. Some of the battles between different peoples have roots that go back hundreds of years. Many still live by the ancient principle of "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." That rule was meant to keep a person from exacting more revenge than what was appropriate. In other words, if someone knocked out one of your teeth, you could only knock out one of theirs and no more! I couldn't find the exact quote, but I think it was Martin Luther King who said, if we all insisted on an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, soon everyone in the world would be blind and toothless. In the Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 6, 38), Jesus told us that's no longer the rule we should live by. Today's parable illustrates his position of forgiveness. We can't hold on to hating and desire for revenge. We have to let go.

A couple of comments might help us get a feel for Jesus' parable. Our translation is very weak and does not give the full impact of what was going on. It spoke of "a huge amount" that a servant owed his king and then of "a much smaller amount" that was owed. The original version (in the Greek) says the man owed his king ten thousand talents. In today's money that would be about 2 or 3 billion dollars. In that society it was customary for people who couldn't pay off their debts to be sold into slavery. The king's generosity was beyond belief. The man whose debt was cancelled was owed (again looking at the original Greek) a hundred denarii. Translated into today's dollars, that's about \$5000. It boggles our mind to think that anyone could be as selfish as the man in today's gospel. He was given so much and, in spite of the unbelievable example of generosity shown by his king, he hadn't learned how to be generous toward others.

Refusing to forgive is a form of anger, anger we will not let go of (or as the first reading describes it so poetically, anger that a person hugs tight). The man in the parable who refused to forgive his fellow servant may have been motivated by selfishness or pettiness or greed or by the refusal to let anyone take advantage of him. I think in most cases, however, when someone refuses to let go of their anger it is because of pride. We tell ourselves, when we are hurt by someone, we should not have been treated like that. No doubt we were treated badly, but we do more harm to ourselves than to anyone else when we keep that anger alive in us. It will only eat us up emotionally and maybe even

physically. As a counselor I have seen what unforgiveness does to the individual who cannot let go of pain or hurt someone has caused them. Jesus' admonition to forgive is good not only spiritually but psychologically too.

One of the people we often have difficulty forgiving is ourselves. We do something we are embarrassed about or ashamed of and we continue to beat ourselves up. I did it to myself for years and, as a result, I always felt a lot of depression. It took me a long time to realize my problem was pride (more accurately it was neurotic pride). Our pride tells us we should be better than we really are and when we fail, our pride comes down on us with a vengeance. Certainly we should keep working to improve ourselves and to learn from our mistakes (this is healthy pride), but we also need to accept the fact that we are not perfect. And beating ourselves up will not help us improve ourselves, it will only depress us. Often times people have complained to me in counseling or in confession "I don't feel as if God has forgiven me for what I did." I tell them, it's because they haven't forgiven themselves.

Obviously today's parable is about forgiveness, but there is another important element to it and that is that we must not forget how generous God has been to us. We celebrate God's goodness now as we continue on with our Mass thanking him for his mercy and love which is worth more than many billions of dollars. It's worth is infinite, because God's love is infinite. Amen.

25th Sunday in Ordinary Time *September 18, 2005*

INTRODUCTION

(Isaiah 25, 6-9; Mt. 20, 1-16) The prophet in today's first reading is speaking to God's people in exile. They were depressed. They had lost everything. They were sure they had lost even God's love because of their sinfulness. The prophet assures them it is never too late to return to the Lord. Even though they were not worthy of it, and they **knew** it, God will extend his mercy toward them if they will reform their lives. When God forgives us it's not because we are worthy, it is because of his own kindness and generosity. Jesus' parable makes us uncomfortable because sometimes God's generosity seems out of control, so far beyond what we consider fair (especially when he is extra generous toward someone besides us). Truly God's thoughts are not our thoughts nor are his ways our ways. His thoughts and his ways are often beyond our understanding.

HOMILY

A lady told the story about her grandmother who owned a country store in a little rural town in Arkansas. (*A 3rd Helping of Chicken Soup for the Soul* - pg 233) The lady telling the story often would help her grandmother in the store. Whenever a customer would come in grandmother, would always ask the person how they were doing. Certain

customers always went on and on complaining about something: it's too hot, or the ground was too hard to plow or whatever. Whenever this happened, grandmother would look at her grandchild and give her a little nod. Then after the complainer was out of the store, she would call her grandchild over and say, "did you hear that? Did you hear what old Tom or Doris was complaining about?" Then she would teach her grandchild a lesson: "There are people who went to sleep all over the world last night, poor and rich and white and black, but they will never wake again. They expected to rise but did not. Their covers became their winding sheets. And those folks would give anything, anything at all for just five minutes of this weather or 10 minutes of plowing that field where the ground is hard. So be careful when you complain, granddaughter. What you're supposed to do when you don't like a thing is change it. If you can't change it, change the way you think about it."

Jesus' society was different than our own. The usual wage for a day laborer was a denarius, which was enough to feed one's family for a day. What the generous owner of the vineyard was doing was to make sure that none of the people who worked for him that day would have to beg, borrow or steal in order to feed their families the next day. It's too bad the ones who worked all day were not happy that the ones who came late would have food for the next day. The owner was fair with all, but more generous with some. And so the ones who got their fair salary, but not the extra bonus complained. Let me say: there are advantages to complaining. It helps us get things off our chest, it helps us sort out our thoughts, it sometimes helps to get things done. Counselors and psychologists and doctors would not be able to help people if people didn't complain. Politicians would be without work, if people didn't complain. Friends and spouses wouldn't be able to give support and sympathy to each other if they didn't let the other person know how they hurt. But we have to be careful not to make complaining a way of life. We have to be careful not to do it out of envy like the people in today's gospel. And if we're going to complain, we should also stop to count our blessings.

Jesus' parable is really about salvation, of course. Remember Jesus received a lot of criticism for associating with sinners. The religious leaders thought the ordinary person had little or no chance to be saved. They thought only the religious leaders were deserving. Jesus' parable was telling everyone God's mercy is available at any time to the person who responds to his invitation to be saved. It's never too late. It's not smart to decide to wait until the last minute, however, because the opportunity to turn to God at the last minute might not be there for any of us. As St. Paul says (II Cor, 6, 2) "Now is the acceptable time! Now is the day of salvation!"

But our parable can apply to more things than salvation. How many times have we said, "God isn't fair?" Fortunately God isn't fair if fair means we get what we deserve. God is more than fair. God is overwhelmingly generous to all of us. So often we think God is being more generous to someone else and we are more deserving. Even if we

were more deserving, and only God knows that, we will only make ourselves miserable by drawing comparisons. We will always find someone who **appears** to be better off than we are. Rather than comparing ourselves with others, it's best to focus on God's goodness to us and to trust that God is more than fair toward any of us. We all have our problems, but we all have much to be thankful for. And the "Eucharist," a word which means "thanksgiving," is the most perfect way to do that.