

18th Sunday in Ordinary Time

August 5, 2007

INTRODUCTION: Today's first reading comes from one of the wisdom books in the Old Testament. This book is sometimes called by its Hebrew title, Qoheleth. The name means simply "one who convenes an assembly." The author was probably a teacher or preacher. When the name Qoheleth is translated into the Greek, it comes out Ecclesiastes. It's a book we hear from only once in the three-year Sunday cycle of readings. And it's a short passage at that. Most of us are familiar with another passage in Qoheleth that begins: "For everything there is a season...a time for every matter under heaven. A time to be born and a time to die, and so on..." Today's passage reminds us of the passing nature of all things.

HOMILY: A sign outside of church announced: "Don't wait for the hearse to take you to church." Today's gospel shows us the folly of failing to grow rich spiritually. It's the only thing that's will outlast everything else. Billy Graham once pointed out "You never see a hearse pulling a U-Haul trailer." When the richest man in a town died, the local news reporter asked his pastor, "how much did he leave." The pastor replied, "All of it!"

Qoheleth said "All things are vanity." The Hebrew word used here for "vanity" means something without substance, something like a puff of smoke. If you read the book of Qoheleth, you get the impression that the author enjoyed all the best things life had to offer: pleasure, wealth, power and knowledge. Yet he found nothing of lasting value or satisfaction. The conclusion of this book tells us to enjoy each day as it comes and not become too attached to anything this world has to offer. It was a practical way of looking at life considering Jewish faith at this time in history had not yet come to a faith in the existence of heaven or hell, reward or punishment. They believed in a kind of existence after death, but it was an existence that was neither happy nor unhappy. With whatever information he had, Qoheleth's conclusion to just enjoy each day as it comes was the best idea anyone could come up with.

But Jesus has more to offer. Jesus offers us something that is lasting. Jesus called the rich farmer a "fool" in today's parable, because the farmer thought he was set for life, he had all he needed. He was wealthy in worldly goods but he did not grow rich in the sight of God. The word "fool" here means someone with limited thinking, someone without good sense! St. Paul gives us the same message in today's second reading: "Think of what is above, not of what is on earth."

The parable Jesus gives us follows a few comments he made about greed and how dangerous it is. Greed certainly is dangerous. It is one of the capital sins and gives rise to things like cheating, stealing, lying, quarreling, fighting and even war. It doesn't sound as if the farmer did any of these bad things. It sounds as if he made his fortune by good weather and good old fashioned hard work. Is Jesus saying it is sinful to be rich and successful? Jesus seems to be saying it is a sin if that is our main focus in life, if we build our security only on the things this world can give us, if we forget where our blessings come from. It is also a sin to be rich if our

hearts are cold to the sufferings of those not so fortunate as we are. I'm not trying to make anyone here feel guilty about not giving a buck to every bum who asks for it. I don't do that myself and I don't feel guilty about it, because I know, from past experience, most of the people who got money out of me were just con artists. I tend to let legitimate agencies, which I support, help the really poor. Going back to the rich farmer, he forgot he was not in control. He owned so much he thought he owned the future and he didn't. He didn't know he had no future and all his wealth would be left behind. His priorities were wrong, Jesus said. There are two remedies that help us keep our priorities in balance. First of all there is the third commandment, which tells us to keep holy the Lord's day. Honoring God reminds us of who God is and that we owe God everything we have and everything we are. Secondly there's a remedy to help us not forget about the needs of others. It's called tithing. Giving away some of our money reminds us it's not all ours. (10% was required of the Jewish people.) It keeps us aware that what we have has been given to us in the first place. People like to say, "I earned it." Maybe so, but where did we get the health, the talent, the energy, the education, the opportunities to earn it. That was all given to us. We do have to provide for ourselves and our families and we have to save for that proverbial rainy day, but we can't become totally selfish either. That's greed. We have to keep things in balance and loving God and loving our neighbor is part of the balance.

You've heard this story before, but it's worth repeating. An American tourist, traveling in Europe, paid a visit to a famous wise and holy rabbi who lived there. The American was surprised when he saw how simply the man lived – in a single room with only books and a table and chair. "Rabbi! Where is your furniture?" asked the tourist. "Where is yours?" the rabbi asked. The American tourist answered, "My furniture? I'm only passing through here." The wise rabbi responded: "So am I!"

19th Sunday in Ordinary Time

August 12, 2007

INTRODUCTION: The spiritual tradition we follow as Christians did not begin with Christ. It began long before Christ as God prepared the world for the coming of Christ through the Jewish people. Our two readings take us back in history to our spiritual beginning. Today's second reading takes us back to the time of Abraham, almost 19 centuries before Christ. Abraham and his wife Sarah were the parents of the Jewish people. The letter to the Hebrews puts Abraham and Sarah before us as models of faith for us to imitate. The first reading takes us several centuries after the time of Abraham to the time when God's people, in faith, left Egypt to head for the Promised Land under the leadership of Moses.

HOMILY: We were introduced to the faith of Abraham and Sarah as they left their homeland and relatives to travel to a new land where God was leading them. They had faith too in God's promise they would have many descendants even as they were without children and were growing older. We were introduced to the faith of the Jewish people as they set out under the

leadership of Moses, leaving behind an unpleasant life of slavery for a more uncertain journey through desert and wilderness to an unknown land.

Each of us today is making his or her own journey. It might be toward graduation from school, it might be toward marriage or toward a new career, it might be toward improved health, it might be toward retirement or it might be just a matter of trying to survive the stresses of each day. Whatever it is, time is moving us along. We are unable to stand still in life, and if we try, we'll eventually discover that we're going backwards. We know from everyday experience that if it's a better place we are moving toward, we need to adequately prepare ourselves for it.

In our journey through life, there is an event that we definitely need to prepare for. That is the day we are going to meet our Lord, not just in prayer, not just in the sacraments, not just in the invisible ways in which he comes into our lives, but in a visible, unmistakable way at the end of life's journey through this life. It's a meeting most of us like to put off as long as possible and many people do not like to even think about. That's why our Lord warns us to prepare for it, because we may tend to procrastinate or just put it out of our minds altogether.

Jesus uses two simple examples. The first is about the head of a household who was out of town for a wedding celebration. In Jesus' day wedding celebrations often went on for days, so it's understandable that the servants would not know when to expect their master's return. The second is about a thief. Of course, a thief doesn't warn a person before breaking into their house. If Jesus were preaching today, he might use the example of terrorism. We're sadly familiar with the havoc it can cause and the need to be diligently on the alert. Unlike a thief or a terrorist who may be prevented from striking, Jesus' coming is not a matter of if but of when.

The reason he warns us is not to fill us with fear, but because he loves us and he wants us to share in all the blessings he has for us. If we're not ready, we may miss out. Most of God's people who left Egypt started off with faith, but when the going got difficult they refused to do the things God told them and they missed out on enjoying the blessings of the Promised Land.

I am sure many people here have seen the sign which said, "Jesus is coming. Try to look busy!" Being prepared is not something we can fake or make happen at the last second. It's the way we live our lives in faith and love. Faith and love are not superficial attitudes that have no substance. They are attitudes that guide us to live our life every day the way Jesus taught us.

Right now we follow the lead Jesus gave us as we do in his memory what he commanded us, worshipping the Father through our sharing in his perfect sacrifice. Amen.

Feast of the Assumption – Vigil Mass

August 14, 2007

INTRODUCTION AT THE VIGIL

It is a dogma of our faith that at the end of her life, Mary, like her son, was taken body and soul into heavenly glory. This is the meaning of the Assumption, whose vigil we celebrate this evening.

Our first reading (I Chronicles 15, 3-4, 15-16; 16, 1-2) is about the Ark of the Covenant, the sacred gold plated box that contained the Ten Commandments. The Ark was the unique symbol of God's presence with Israel. It was constructed in the desert by Moses on the way to the Promised Land. When King David established his capital in Jerusalem about the year 1000 BC, he brought the Ark there. Today's reading describes this solemn and joyful occasion. After the temple was built, the Ark was placed in the Holy of Holies and there it remained for 400 years until the Babylonians destroyed the temple and took the Ark. The Babylonians may have destroyed it or it may be hidden away somewhere, but so far Indiana Jones hasn't found it!

In Christian symbolism, Mary is sometimes referred to as the Ark of the Covenant. Just as God was present in a special way wherever the Ark was taken, so God was present with Mary in a most special way when she carried within her womb the only Son of God, Jesus our Savior.

The early Christians also saw Jerusalem as a symbol of heaven. That symbolism is reflected in today's first reading. The Ark being taken up to Jerusalem symbolizes Mary being taken body and soul into the heavenly kingdom.

HOMILY

A woman in today's gospel exclaimed how fortunate Jesus' mother was to have had such a son. (Lk. 11, 27-28) On first hearing Jesus' response it sounds as if Jesus is denying the importance of his mother. Jesus was saying, however, that the most important thing about Mary is not her physical motherhood, but it was her willingness to do all that God asked of her. That made her more one with Jesus and more like Jesus than anything else. She was the perfect and number one disciple of Jesus in always being willing to do what God asked of her. She remained faithful during even her most bitter trials and challenging moments.

In our society a person's importance is usually defined by wealth or fame. With God it's not that way. It's our relationship with Jesus and our willingness to love God and others as he did. And Mary was absolutely the best in this regard, so much so that she was first to share in the fullness of life Christ came to bring us, which includes the resurrection of our bodies.

Today's feast is a feast to honor Mary and it is fitting that we do so, since God himself has so honored her. But it is also a feast that shows us God's plans for all those who faithfully follow God's will.

Feast of the Assumption

August 15, 2007

INTRODUCTION ON THE FEAST

(Rev. 11, 19a; 12, 1-6a, 10ab; I Cor. 15, 20-27; Lk. 1, 39-56) The book of Revelation is highly symbolic. Some of the symbolism is quite obvious while it requires a fairly extensive knowledge of Scripture to interpret some of the other symbols. In today's first reading we hear about a woman, a child and a dragon. The dragon is the devil and the powers of evil at work in the world. The child is Christ. The woman in our reading has a double symbolism. She stands for Mary, the physical mother of Jesus Christ, and she stands for the Church, our spiritual mother who brings Jesus Christ to birth in us through faith and the sacraments. In today's passage the woman is rescued from the powers of the dragon and is described in great glory. This too has a double symbolism. It symbolizes the glory of Mary in the assumption. It also symbolizes God's faithful people whom he will rescue from evil and will bring, in the resurrection from the dead, into the glory of heaven.

HOMILY

It is recorded nowhere in Scripture when, where or how Mary died. Nor do the Scriptures tell us about her assumption. It has been a part, however, of the very ancient tradition of the Church that Mary was assumed bodily into heavenly glory when her life here on earth was ended. One early document referring to this event comes from the Bishop of Jerusalem in 451, St. Juvenal. He was asked by the emperor of Constantinople to bring the body of Mary to Constantinople. He replied to the emperor that Mary had died in the presence of all the apostles. But her tomb, when opened upon the request of St. Thomas, was found empty. Thus the apostles concluded that her body was taken up to heaven as Jesus was.

Some people belittle tradition as if it were unimportant. They claim to believe only the written words of the Scriptures. Yet, if we stop and think about it, we would have no Scriptures without tradition for the Scriptures came from the Church's tradition. For example, the earliest New Testament writings we have are the letters of Paul, the first of which was written about the year 51 A.D. Of our four gospels, Mark's is the first and it was written about 70 A.D. I say this so you can see the importance of tradition. The Church had only its tradition to go on until Paul and the evangelists started writing it down 20, 30, 40 years after Christ, at the earliest. So to say that the knowledge of the assumption of Mary came from the very early tradition of the Church is to give a lot of weight to this teaching. But to eliminate any doubt as to whether Mary actually was assumed into heavenly glory, the Holy Father, Pope Pius XII, after reviewing the belief of the Church through the ages, made it a dogma of our faith in 1950.

In today's gospel St. Luke tells us about Mary who is a young girl going to visit her much older cousin Elizabeth. Mary had just been visited by the angel, and she had accepted the invitation to be the mother of the Savior God was sending to his people. So she is at this moment

unmarried and yet pregnant through the power of the Holy Spirit It was not a happy situation to be in. She could have been rejected by her husband to be, she could have been rejected by her family or could even have been put to death. Yet she is full of trust in God and praises God's greatness and God's goodness. There is no expression of "poor me." She is entirely focused on God. Mary shows us how to be trusting and in her assumption she shows us where that trust will lead us.

Today's feast honors Mary, for God himself has honored her. In her openness to God and in her willingness to always do whatever God wanted, God rewarded her in a unique way. But today's feast also is a source of hope for us. Christ came, as he says in St. John's gospel, that we might have the fullness of life. Our faith tells us our bodies too will share in that fullness. So Mary is allowed to enjoy ahead of time what God's plan is for all of us who are faithful in following him and serving him.

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

August 19, 2007

INTRODUCTION

Unfortunately suffering and turmoil have been part of everyday life in the Middle East for a long time. Our first reading takes us back 600 years before Christ when the land we now know as Iraq had the name Babylon. The Babylonians were in power at that time in history and the king and his army's ambitions were to conquer all the nations around them. The events in our first reading occurred at a time when the Babylonians were trying to take Jerusalem. Jeremiah, God's prophet, told the Jews it was useless for them to fight or to try to defend themselves; they should just go ahead and surrender or Jerusalem would be destroyed. Such talk was viewed as unpatriotic and Jeremiah was considered a traitor. Many of the Jewish leaders decided to kill Jeremiah and they persuaded their king, Zedekiah, to give in to their wishes. He allowed Jeremiah to be thrown into a cistern to die. Later, Ebed-Melech, a Cushite (which means an Ethiopian), one of Jeremiah's friends, persuaded the king to change his mind.

HOMILY

A "Calvin and Hobbes" cartoon pictured Calvin, the little boy sitting under a sign that read "kick in the butt for one dollar!" When Hobbes, a talking tiger and Calvin's playmate, saw his friend sitting under this sign, he asked "How's business?" "Awful!" Calvin replied, "and I don't know why, because so many people need a good kick in the butt!"

A lot of us might need it at times, but few of us appreciate it. The people who heard Jeremiah's predictions that Jerusalem would be destroyed if they didn't surrender weren't happy about what they heard. They hoped to get rid of Jeremiah as a result. Jesus too had to confront many of the people in authority in his day and we know what happened to him. Knowing how he would be rejected and would have to suffer for teaching God's message, he felt it only fair to warn his

followers that they may be in for a lot of pain and suffering if they chose to follow him.

Pain and suffering, of course, comes to everyone, whether we are good, bad or indifferent. If we do not live good lives, often we have to suffer for it, but sometimes even those who are perfectly faithful to God have to suffer too, as we hear today. One of my favorite books, *The Road Less Traveled*, begins with a very profound insight. M. Scott Peck, a psychiatrist and Episcopal priest, begins his book by saying "Life is Difficult." That's not especially profound, but what I found so profound is his statement that once we accept life is difficult, it's not so difficult. It's more difficult for those who think it shouldn't be so. I had a good friend who was pushing a person in a wheelchair at his synagogue and while he was doing this he suffered a stroke. He would often cynically say to me "no good deed goes unpunished." I think at times we all feel that way, that life is not fair. I believe most of us have the unexpressed expectation that if we do what God wants, God should do what we want. Well, sometimes he does, and sometimes he doesn't, at least not right away.

A lot of times it's not the difficulties that come our way that cause us pain and suffering but the attitude we take toward them. Dr. Richard Carlson's book: *Don't sweat the small stuff, and it's all small stuff*, tells the story of a journalist interviewing two bricklayers working at a construction site. The journalist asked the one man, "what are you doing?" He said, "I'm just an underpaid and overworked bricklayer wasting my time piling bricks on top of one another." He asked the other what he was doing and he said, "I'm the luckiest person in the world. I get to be a part of great and important projects. I help turn single bricks into magnificent structures." They were both right. We see in life what we want to see. If you want to find ugliness, you will find plenty of it. If you want to find fault with life you can find lots of reasons to do so. But the opposite is also true. There are times when in my ministry and in my life, I feel like the luckiest person in the world. I am grateful that I am in a position at times to be able to help people in very important ways. On the other hand, there have been moments when I felt like Jeremiah, sinking in the mud at the bottom of a well where everything looks dark and hopeless. It's only faith that gets me through. I know God will not fail us if we are faithful to him, but God does not always make things happen the way we think he should. When he doesn't make things go our way, we have to trust God has a better plan, a plan we do not yet see. The letter to the Hebrews which we heard speaks of the example of Jesus whose work and life seemed to be a great failure when he died on a cross, but now he has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. The author of the letter encourages us not to grow despondent, but to keep alive in us the hope of eternal joy that God has promised to those who are faithful to him. When we take our last breath, that is what's really going to count. Amen.

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time

August 26, 2007

INTRODUCTION: Our first reading today (Is. 66, 18-21) comes from the time when the Jews

were recovering from their long exile and enslavement in Babylon. It was a difficult time. Their cities, homes, and farms had lain in ruins for 50 years. The prophet who speaks is not a pessimist though. He sees great things for Jerusalem. He tells God's discouraged people some day people from all nations would come to worship the same God they worshipped. Even the Jewish priesthood would be opened up to foreigners. There are two lessons here for us: 1) spiritually the Jews are our ancestors and 2) God wants all people to be saved. The gate of heaven is open to everyone, a wonderful image. But Jesus, who always wishes to keep us in touch with reality, reminds us that, sadly, not everyone is headed that way (Lk 13, 22-30).

HOMILY: Jesus is asked a question we would all like to know the answer to. "Will only a few people be saved?" From the gospel, it sounds as if there are going to be lots of people in heaven, people coming from north and south, east and west. However, we would have liked a few more details, numbers, percentages perhaps, but I guess Jesus figures we can answer the question for ourselves by seeing how people live according to his teachings. If we live by his teachings, we're on our way to eternal happiness; if not, we'll lose out. After all he told us, "I am the way, the truth and the life."

When I was growing up, I think most people believed that it would be very hard to be saved. We worried about the smallest things such as whether we ate a little meat on Friday or drank anything before Communion. Society today has gone to the other extreme. People in today's society seem to think salvation is practically a given, that the only people not in heaven are those who had to work hard at avoiding getting there. Surveys today show almost 75% of Catholics say they can be good Catholics without attending church every Sunday. Half believe they can be a good Catholic without donating time or money to help the poor. It's like saying we can love God while choosing to ignore the important ways in which he asks us to serve him.

Heaven will have room for people from all nations, but there is still the "narrow gate" we have to pass through. In other words we can't take salvation for granted. The gospels were written in Greek and when Jesus said, "strive to enter through the narrow gate," the verb translated as "strive" in the original Greek is "agonízomai." We can hear the English word "agony" in this. "Agonízomai" means a lot more than "strive." It is a word often used in connection with the effort needed to win something – as to win in an Olympic event, or a performance, or a lawsuit or a contest. A good example would be a football game where the players work hard to get into condition and then they put everything they have into playing a good game. Can you see a coach saying to his players: "now get out there and strive to win today, guys?" Jesus is saying, "put everything you have into getting through that narrow gate." The image of "giving it all we have to win" is repeated in the next sentence when Jesus says, "many will attempt to enter but will not be strong enough."

It's not that we are competing with other people, like people do in sports, where if one person wins, others have to lose. What we have to compete with is our own selves, our own laziness, our own pride, our own self-centeredness, our own love of comfort or pleasure or material possessions; not to mention having to compete with the sinful attractions of society or the temptations of the devil. Life is a battleground and our Lord wants us to know it so we avoid the

pitfalls, especially the pitfall of not realizing the importance of taking our faith seriously.

The image of the closed door that Jesus used in the gospel was a warning to the Jews not to take their position as “chosen people” for granted. It’s a similar warning for all of us and the “closed door” reminds all of us that time will run out. Life is just so long and none of us know how long it will last.

All of this is very serious. Jesus doesn’t tell us this to depress us or to discourage us or to scare us. He tells us this because he loves us. He wants us to be happy with him forever. All we need to do is look at the crucifix to know about his love. We celebrate that love today as we celebrate the Eucharist and it is that which gives us hope and joy.