

## 22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

September 2, 2007

A man about my age tells the story that recently he was on an airplane when an attractive lady, somewhere in her 20's, asked if she could sit next to him. His male ego soared. Soon they were chatting pleasantly. She told him it was her first airplane ride and a friend told her she would be less nervous if she sat next to someone she thought she could trust. She continued, saying: "You look just like my father."

A man died and when he got to heaven he made an appointment to meet with God. He said he had some questions that had puzzled him all his life that he had to have answered. So God met with him and he asked God: "Why did you make women with such beautiful faces?" God said: "So you would love them." Then he asked, "why did you give women such beautiful bodies?" Again God said "So you would love them." Then he asked: "Well, God, why did you make women – you know – not very smart?" God said: "So they would love you!"

Jesus said, "everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted." We all enjoy and even laugh at seeing someone who is full of themselves be cut down to size. I love the comment Golda Meir, the Prime Minister of Israel, made to a visiting diplomat who was trying to be very humble as he spoke to her. She brought him back down to earth with the comment: "Don't be so humble – you're not that great." I am certain Jesus had a great sense of humor and there was some humor in his little story about the person who tried to get into the most honored position at the dinner and he was asked to move down.

Jesus' teaching about taking the lowest place at a banquet with the hope that the host would say "My friend, move to a higher position," is not really an example of true humility. It only shows that even in everyday activities not being prideful can have an advantage. The person who picks the lowest place with the hope of being given more honors may not be any less proud than the person who pushes himself to the front of the line, but may simply be more clever. When I was younger I used to sit in the back of church and very proudly considered myself to be more humble than the rest of the people there. When I realized that where I was sitting had nothing to do with humility, I decided to sit up further and was amazed to find out how much more I got out of the Mass. To return to the gospel, for the Jews at the time of Jesus it was a very important thing as to where a person sat in an assembly or at a table. We are not quite so conscious about that today, but probably no more humble than the people of Jesus' day. We have created our own symbols of status in modern day society.

Jesus' teaching on true humility comes when he tells us about inviting the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind; those who cannot repay the favor. Humility is the ability to see everyone as having been created in the image and likeness of God. Christ-like humility is a love for all people because they are loved by God. Jesus not only taught it but practiced it. He responded to all people. He often got in trouble with the religious leaders for associating too often with those who were considered to be on the bottom rung of the social ladder. I wonder if humility is not so

much about what we think of ourselves, as it's about what we think of others and how we treat them. Of course, that includes what we think about God and how much we are aware of how dependent we are on our Creator.

The word "humility" comes from the Latin word humus, which means earth. No matter how wonderful we believe we may be, and each of us is a wonderful gift of God, we can't forget where we all came from. We can't forget that the Son of God came down to us to share his life with us. "I came that they might have life and may have it to the full." This will be a revelation of great wonder and we will discover how truly wonderful we are with God's grace.

As you come to Mass today, you are showing you recognize that dependence. Thus you are truly humble and are grounded in truth as you express it in our liturgy.

### **23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time**

**September 9, 2007**

**INTRODUCTION:** (Philemon: 9-10,12-17) When we think of slavery we think of the brutal situation of African slaves as it existed in our own country up until the middle of the 19th century. In the Roman Empire 20 centuries ago, where slavery was common, it was much different. Slaves came from nations and peoples that Rome had conquered. There were probably more white slaves than blacks. Many would have been educated or highly skilled and would have worked as musicians, scribes, craftsmen, teachers and even doctors. Slaves could be set free by their masters for good service or a slave could sometimes save up enough money to buy his or her own freedom. Today's second reading is about a slave, Onesimus. He escaped from his master, Philemon. By law Onesimus could have been put to death for escaping. He knew Paul for Paul had converted his master, Philemon to Christ. So, in fear for his life he ran to St. Paul, who was in prison at the time, probably in Ephesus. In those days prisoners were just locked up and they were not given three square meals a day or gymnasiums to work out in or cable TV's to entertain them. Unless a prisoner had someone to bring them food and take care of their needs, they probably would have starved to death. So, while Onesimus was with Paul, he took care of him and in the process Paul converted him to Christ. Paul thus sees himself as his spiritual father and refers to Onesimus as his own child. Paul felt an obligation to send him back to Philemon. He didn't feel right benefiting from a gift that had not been given to him. Paul asked Philemon in the letter we hear in today's second reading to receive Onesimus back, not as a piece of property, but as a brother in the Lord. Christianity transcends all other relationships as we hear in today's gospel.

**HOMILY:** Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. St. Luke tells us he was traveling with great crowds. Jesus' disciples and the people following him were expecting some major changes in their lives when Jesus would arrive in Jerusalem. They expected Jesus would spearhead a resistance against their Roman oppressors, drive the Roman army out of Israel and take control

of their land and their lives. For almost 600 years they lived under the rule of foreign kings. Now they would have their land back and their own king. Not only would they be free but life would be really wonderful for God's people for Jesus had unusual powers: he could heal the sick, feed the hungry, even raise the dead. No king in the history of the world would be so great! They anticipated Jesus would be their messiah and life would be fantastic. Jesus knew differently. He alone knew what was about to happen. So he told them, as he always spoke the truth, you can't follow me unless you hate your father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters and even your own life. You'll have a cross to pick up if you want to be my disciple. Like a man building a tower or a king going into battle, are they prepared for what they would face, are they sure they have what it takes?

One wonders what happened to the great crowds following him. Did they begin to drift off? There's one word in today's gospel that really shocks us (as I'm sure it shocked those who heard him): the word "hate." Certainly we know Jesus doesn't want us to hate anyone. So how could Jesus tell us to "hate" even those closest to us? The oldest document we have that reports Jesus' words is the Greek text of the gospels. Indeed, the Greek uses the verb "miseo" which means "hate." It is from that word that we get such English words as: misanthrope and misogyny. Miseo, however, has a secondary meaning which is "to prefer or favor something or someone less." And of course this is what Jesus means. St. Matthew helps us understand exactly what Jesus meant when he quoted Jesus in a parallel passage in his gospel, where Jesus said: "Whoever loves his father or mother, brother or sister, more than me is not worthy of me." The only thing Jesus wants us to truly hate is sin. But Jesus statement is still very challenging in that he is telling us if we are going to follow him, he must be more important to us than everyone and everything in our lives. He must be more important to us than even our own physical life. And indeed many Christians have had to face that dilemma and have given up life in this world in order to hold on to their faith. We call them martyrs, not the kind of martyrs who are suicide bombers who want to maim and kill, but martyrs in the sense of witnesses, witnesses to love: love for Jesus and love for others. In brief, we must be willing to lose everything rather than lose Jesus, or we are not his disciple.

Jesus would make a very poor politician. He doesn't tell us things we like to hear. He tells it like it is. He tells us it will not always be easy if we go with him. True, but I have seen over and over again, life is even harder if we try to live our lives without him. Only those who have made the decision to put Christ first know that they have really gained everything, for in Jesus is the fullness of life, the fullness of all that is good.

Too many Christians think of their faith like some kind of insurance. As long as they pay their premiums they're protected. And they try to figure out what is the minimum they can get by with to still be covered. For example, if the rule says go to Mass every Sunday, they figure well maybe once or twice a month will be just as good. If the rule says love your neighbor, well maybe I'll still be covered if I don't hurt anyone even if I never do anything to help anyone. I'm sure you can think of other examples of what one theologian called "cheap grace." The story of the tower half built is an image of our spiritual lives when they are built on half-hearted efforts.

Heaven is not going to be “pie in the sky.” Heaven is the happiness of surrendering ourselves to the greatest lover in the universe.

## **24th Sunday in Ordinary Time**

**September 16, 2007**

**INTRODUCTION:** Our first reading (Exodus 32,7-11.13-14) takes us back to the time of Moses, about 1300 years before Christ. The people of Israel were a slaves who had just escaped from Egypt through God’s power and Moses’ leadership. God had just made them his people at Mt. Sinai through a covenant in which they pledged to honor Yahweh as their only God. God then called Moses to the top of Mt. Sinai to speak further with him. With their leader out of sight, the people got into trouble. Probably following the customs of the Egyptians, they tried to represent their God in animal form and they fashioned for themselves a golden calf. This is where our first reading begins. God is angry with his people. Notice, in speaking to Moses, he calls them “your people.” Moses becomes an intercessor for the people and “convinces” God to be forgiving. His prayer displays total unselfishness. God, of course, forgives them. In the second reading we hear St. Paul describe what a sinful person he once was and how God was merciful to him (1 Tim, 1,12-17). Jesus gives us three beautiful parables on forgiveness in today’s gospel (Lk. 15,1-32).

**HOMILY:** The criminal was being led to the courtroom by the bailiff. On the way the criminal asked if the judge was a tough one. The bailiff said “yes, he’s as tough as Pontius Pilate.” The criminal said “Was this Pilate judge tough? I ain’t never heard of him since I ain’t from this area.”

Gratefully our Lord is not as tough on us as we were on him when he was accused before Pilate. Our readings today are about God’s forgiveness. St. Paul tells us today “You can depend on this as worthy of full acceptance: that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.”

We have just heard three parables about God’s forgiveness. The first and second are very similar (about the good shepherd who seeks for the one lost sheep and the woman who seeks for the one lost coin). They tell us each and every one of us are important to God. God is not ready to say “I have so many people who believe in me and love me that this one or that one who doesn’t isn’t all that important.” Each of us is important and is loved.

Then there is the story of the prodigal son. I think it is a magnificent description of the divine-human dynamic. Some people may find the story offensive and feel it is unfair as the elder son did. I often think, if God were to stick by what is fair and give all of us what we deserve, we would all be in trouble. I’m grateful for a God whose sense of love outweighs his sense of fairness. The story shows us that God’s mercy is always there for us, but it depends on us as to whether we receive it. If we have moved away from God, God’s mercy cannot reach us until we

recognize where we are and “come to our senses” as the young man in today’s gospel. The young man had to make a 180-degree turnaround. Notice he came home intending to be only a servant, a hired hand, but he was fully restored to his father’s home and his father’s love (less his inheritance which was already gone by this time).

I would like to mention another aspect of forgiveness between God and ourselves. Sometimes in life we have to forgive God. Terrible things happen in people’s lives; that’s part of being human. But sometimes people blame God for it and they spend many years angry at God because of what happened.

As with any anger or resentment, if we carry it around for long, it only eats us up inside. At times it may be understandable, but even then it does no good to hang on to it. It will only drag us down and destroy our peace of mind. The only thing any of us can do when we have questions about why things happen, or even when we get angry about things, is to reaffirm our faith that God is in charge and knows what he’s doing. We have to trust that he loves us. Meditating on the cross can help us do that.

To sum all this up, we must be patient with God and trust him. Thankfully he is patient with us. If life takes us in the wrong direction, if we get lost, God will seek us out and take us back. But we have to choose not to stay lost and in humility head back home. The homecoming will be something to celebrate.

## **25th Sunday in Ordinary Time**

**September 23, 2007**

**INTRODUCTION:** Our first reading comes from 2700 years ago. Israel was enjoying a time of great prosperity materially, but not spiritually. Their prosperity turned their minds away from God. They resented the Sabbath and the new moon. These were holy days on which work was forbidden. This kept them from what they considered the most important thing in life - making money. The ephah and shekel were weights they used to weigh the produce they bought and to weigh the produce they sold. Apparently they frequently used dishonest weights so they could cheat both supplier and customer. They even exploited their customers by mixing useless materials in with the products they wanted to sell – such as mixing chaff with the wheat. The world has changed in 2700 years, but human nature hasn’t.

**HOMILY:** One time Mark Twain was involved in an argument about marriage with a Mormon. The Mormon said to Twain, “show me one place in the bible where having more than one wife is forbidden.” Twain said, “that’s easy. The bible said: ‘no man can serve two masters.’”

Amos the prophet is not shy about telling God’s people (us included) how God despises dishonesty and injustice. We just got a sampling of his preaching in today’s first reading. In our

gospel, we may be left a bit confused. It sounds as if Our Lord is speaking in a somewhat approving way of the dishonest steward. The steward may have squandered his master's property, enriched himself at his master's expense, or he may simply have been incompetent. Our Lord doesn't give us the details as to why he lost his job. Even if he was incompetent, he was bright enough to provide for his future. Before he left his position, he called in all the people who owed his master money and reduced the size of their debt. Then they would be indebted to him. Commentators suggest perhaps he was eliminating any commission that would have been due to him. Whatever was behind all of this, his dishonesty was not grand larceny or he would have been worried about jail rather than being worried about digging or begging. If we try to figure out the details, we'll miss the main point of the parable, and that's all a parable is - a simple story with one point. The point is people work very hard at providing for their wellbeing in this life. How hard or dedicated are we in providing for our spiritual wellbeing?

We are stewards of the time, the talents, and the material resources that we've been given. We can waste them, we can use them to serve only our own selfish interests, we can even use them to take advantage of others or to help others. We have to remember that we have One higher than ourselves to whom we will have to make an accounting of how well we've used the gifts we've been given.

Let me expand on this using two examples: time and money (two things that tell us where our priorities lie). How many times I've heard people say "I would like to pray more," "I would like to do more to help others, etc.," and "when I have more time." We all have the same amount of time, 24 hours. The secret of finding more time is good time management. The secret of good time management is setting priorities. In the past I frequently had difficulty getting all of my meditation in during the day. Once I decided to put meditation at the top of the list of things I had to do that day, I never had any difficulty after that. I'm not saying it's the very first thing I do in the morning, sometimes it's close to the last thing I do at night, but it always takes priority over any other discretionary time I have that day. Now I have to work on getting more exercise.

Another example involves money. Do we need it? Of course. It represents a roof over our heads and food on our tables. Too often we equate it with happiness and power but acquiring it can control people's lives. Jesus wants us to use it wisely but not let it become our master. One way of keeping things in perspective in this area is to tithe. I think that's what Our Lord means when he says, "make friends for yourselves with wicked money, so that when it fails, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings."

Jesus tells us today as "children of the light" we have to provide for our spiritual lives just as seriously as people provide for their material needs. In other words, "be smart!" And we are being smart when we realize this life is only temporary (important as it may be), but the next life will last forever.

**26th Sunday Ordinary Time**

**September 30, 2007**

**INTRODUCTION:** Last week's first reading was from Amos and so is today's. Last week his prophecy was aimed at materialism and the oppression of the poor in the northern kingdom of Israel. Today's reading (Amos 6, 1a.4-7) seems directed to the people in the southern kingdom, "the complacent in Zion" (another name for Jerusalem). Perhaps this warning came after the Assyrians destroyed the northern kingdom which is called "Joseph" in today's reading. The complacent in Jerusalem were living pampered, comfortable lives, paying no attention to the devastation of the north and not concerned that their own country was headed toward the same fate because of their social and moral depravity. Amos was a true prophet whose words to be true.

**HOMILY:** Two men were in a private plane and they crashed on an island in the South Pacific. They both survived and one of the survivors right away surveyed the island and returned to his buddy to tell him they were doomed. The island was uninhabited and he could find no food or water. His buddy said "Not to worry. I make \$250,000 a week." The man shook his friend and said "You don't understand. We're going to die. There's no one around, no food, no water." His buddy repeated: "Not to worry. I make \$250,000 a week." Once more he screamed at him saying: "Don't you hear me. We're going to die. There's no food, no water, no one around." His buddy said: "Don't worry. I make \$250,000 a week. I'm a Church going Christian and I tithe. My pastor will find us!"

Today's gospel (Lk. 16, 19-31) always leaves me feeling guilty. I live a fairly comfortable life (I have a place to live, enough to eat, a bed to sleep in, I like to go out occasionally for a nice meal) and there are so many people like Lazarus out there. I try to give generously to charity, but the many people suffering all over the world is overwhelming. I'm sure many of you feel the same way. At the same time, I hate to be taken advantage of by phonies and that has happened more times than I would like to admit in the past 43 years. I just do what I can, knowing I can't solve every problem. It's good to be challenged by Jesus, however, because unless we're challenged, we easily become complacent and self centered. That's what happened to the people of Jerusalem at the time of Amos. That's what happened to the rich man in today's gospel.

Amos and Jesus are not saying a person will automatically be condemned because they are wealthy or will automatically be saved because they are poor. We will all be judged by the same law, the great commandment of love - love for God and love for others. I know people who are well off and at the same time they are very loving and generous, and I know people who are poor who are self-centered and egotistical. Having wealth is not necessarily a vice and being poor is not necessarily virtuous. The rich man in today's gospel was condemned not because he was a bad man, cruel, violent or evil; he was condemned for a lack of love. For him Lazarus just didn't exist. When the rich man wanted a favor from Lazarus in the next life, Abraham told him that there was a great chasm between the two of them. One commentator pointed out that the rich man was the one who created the chasm in the first place, holding Lazarus at arms length

as if he wasn't there. Even in the next life, the rich man treated Lazarus as his lackey, not even addressing him but asking Abraham to send him to bring water or to go to warn his brothers.

Probably no society in the history of this world has enjoyed comfort than we do in America today. Kings and emperors did not live as well as most middle class families in America. Comfort is not sinful. But it is distracting and can be dangerous in that it can make us turn our attention increasingly toward ourselves and help us to forget about our responsibility to help others.

Our readings today force us to consider our personal attitude toward the material blessings we enjoy. The essence of today's readings is that no matter how hard we've worked or how talented we may be or how thrifty we've been, what we have is not just for our own self indulgence. We must share with others. The irony of this is that on the whole, those who have less of this world's goods are more generous than those who have been blessed with more. I say this because statistics show that, in general, the more income a person has the less, percentage wise, they give to charity. That is really ironic.

Most often Jesus' words are very comforting, but today's readings may make us uncomfortable, especially if we need to be made more sensitive to the suffering of others. If Jesus makes us uncomfortable it's to help us think about what God wants from us and if we are doing what he wants? Jesus wants only one thing, our salvation, and the only way that can happen is if we follow the way he has shown us.

If we keep remembering where our blessings come from, then we will be more likely to remember that they have not been given to us just to help us become selfish, self-centered people. Our great prayer of thanksgiving each week, which we call the Mass or the Eucharist, helps us to keep remembering where all our blessings come from.