

27th Sunday in Ordinary Time

October 6/7, 2007

INTRODUCTION: (Habakkuk 1,2-3.2,2-4; Lk 17,5-10) Six hundred years before Christ the Babylonians were the dominant power in the middle east. With their capital in modern day Iraq, their power stretched for hundreds of miles around. The prophet Habakkuk who speaks to us in today's first reading lived during the difficult 10 year period that began with the Babylonian army's first invasion into Judah but before they completely destroyed it. He asks God why God doesn't do something about the terrible things that were happening. God assures him things will be OK if the people just put their trust in God. Unfortunately they didn't, history tells us.

HOMILY: You may have heard about a book that came out recently entitled: Mother Teresa, Come Be My Light. It describes the uncertainty and discouragement Mother Teresa felt through most of her life. It was a surprise to many that such a holy person suffered such spiritual distress. Some have even suggested that maybe she didn't have a very strong faith if she encountered such difficulties in her spiritual life. That's because those who thought this way do not really understand faith.

The fact is that she had to have tremendous faith to be able to keep doing what she was doing, serving God, praying daily for two hours in church and not letting her uncertainty and discouragement cause her to give up or lose heart.

So many people assume that the saints lived ecstatically happy lives, that they were always in union with God and that they were never troubled by the trials and difficulties of life. Surely some of them had moments of ecstasy and some of them may have had lengthy periods of supreme joy in experiencing God's presence, but from what I've read of the saints, uncertainty and discouragement was normal. Some of them had long periods of uncertainty and discouragement such as John of the Cross, St. Teresa of Avila and St. Therese of Lisieux. Apparently for Mother Teresa, uncertainty and discouragement was a way of life. I cannot second guess the way God deals with those he loves, and surely God was giving Mother Teresa the opportunity to grow stronger in her faith, but looking at this from a natural point of view and considering the kind of ministry she was doing, ministering to the poorest of the poor and dying, it's not a great surprise she would encounter a lot of discouragement.

St. Teresa of Avila, who, as I remember spent almost 20 years without feeling God's presence, describes it as the "most painful life that can be imagined." She is often quoted as saying to God: "If this is the way you treat your friends, it's no wonder you have so few of them."

Faith means believing something as true without tangible evidence. If we always perceived God's love, we wouldn't need to have faith. We would know experientially that God loves us. But because we do not perceive it always, faith is necessary. There are moments when we feel God's presence, when we know his love, but most of us, most of the time, live our lives through faith. And when uncertainty or discouragement comes along, unfortunately many people

crumble. The song is true for most of us: We walk by faith, not by sight.

What I'm talking about is what Spiritual writers refer to as spiritual darkness. It is also referred to as a desert experience when spiritual comfort and consolation is no where around. Spiritual writers tell us this desert experience, this spiritual dryness is part of everyone's faith journey. That is why we are encouraged to be constant in our prayers, whether we feel like it or not, whether they give us comfort or not. It is a time of growth. It is the only way to know the God who cannot be known through our own human resources.

Basically this is what Jesus tells us in today's gospel, in response to the apostles request "Increase our faith." Do what we have been commanded and consider ourselves as "unworthy of any praise." This is faith and this is how to increase it, praying and doing God's work not to get paid off with nice feelings, not to do it not to please ourselves (although there is some pleasure in knowing we are doing right) but we do what's right in order to please God. The payoff will come and it will be beyond our fondest dreams, but as the prophet Habakkuk tells us in the first reading: wait for it. It will not disappoint if we do not get discouraged and give up for the just one, because of his faith, shall live.

28th Sunday in Ordinary Time

October 14, 2007

INTRODUCTION - Israel and Syria have been fighting with each other for centuries. Today's first reading takes us back to 850 BC when Syria was then called Aram. There was conflict then. Our reading is about an Aramean army general named Naaman. He had the dreaded disease of leprosy. His wife had a slave girl, an Israelite, who most probably was captured in battle. She told her master, Naaman, about a prophet in Israel who would be able to cure his disease. That prophet was Elisha. It must have taken a lot of humility and faith for this proud Aramean general to go into the territory of their enemy looking for Elisha. And when he located him, Elisha wouldn't even meet Naaman. He just told him through a messenger to go and bathe in the Jordan River. Naaman was insulted and decided to go back home. But his friends persuaded him to do as the prophet said. Thus our first reading begins. The reading prepares us for the gospel when we hear about Jesus healing 10 people who had leprosy.

[Jerry preached for me. I made some comments at 40 hours closing. They are printed below.]

FORTY HOURS:

It's been years that I've preached at the closing of our Solemn Annual Eucharistic Devotions. I usually try to find another preacher, because most people hear me every week. But for special reasons I wanted to preach today.

Today we are celebrating four important anniversaries in our parish. Ted Schmidt, our deacon had been ordained 25 years. Unfortunately Ted couldn't be with us. He broke his hip and is still in the hospital, doing well, but not yet able to climb steps. Ted and Roselyn joined St. Boniface about the same time that I arrived here and I would have been lost without their very capable and dedicated ministry.

Sister Ann is our school principal and has been a wonderful gift to St. Boniface. She is celebrating 50 years in the Sisters of Mercy. She always tells people we hired her because she needed a job and couldn't find one. I find that hard to believe. I know when we were searching for a principal, Sr. Ann had just left St. Margaret of York and I called one of my friends who taught there, Sister Madonna, and asked her to tell me what she could about Sister Ann. By the time she finished I had already made up my mind to hire her, sight unseen. I've thanked God for her ever since. She will have a few things to say for herself when I finish.

Then there is Carol Ann Roosa. Carol has been here ten years, but I have been working with Carol almost thirty. She first started out as our cleaning lady when I was at St. Columban. She eventually moved into the position of secretary. Since she has been here she has been and still is Pastoral Administrator, Director of Religious Education and Business Manager. She has been a great support in ministry and a good friend. She will be 60 tomorrow. She too will say a few words.

Then there is the fact that I turn 70 years old today. It is because today happens to be the day, I started thinking about the possibility of making this a day for a grand celebration with friends and including others who are celebrating significant life events in on it. There's not much I need to say about myself. Most of you know me pretty well by now.

Today we are having Evening Prayer, an ancient tradition of praise of God that goes back way before the time of Christ. It is a custom that has continued on in the Church until the present. Priests, deacons and religious are committed to daily prayer and Evening Prayer is part of our prayers. It's seldom celebrated with such solemnity as we see this evening except in the monasteries, but it is still part of our daily prayer.

It is a fitting way to conclude our Solemn Annual Eucharistic Devotions. Our prayer in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament remind us of the great gift of Jesus present with us in the Eucharist. St. John tells us that when Jesus spoke about giving us his body and blood to be our food and our drink, many of his followers walked away, thinking he was talking nonsense. He didn't stop them or try to explain away what he was telling them. He knew it was hard to understand, that's why he asked for faith. It's still hard to understand for many people, even us Christians.

As I turn 70, I was thinking of what it might have been like when I was an infant. One of the things an infant has to do is trust. When the father or mother feeds the child, the child trustfully (although instinctively) eats what they are given – most of the time. Sometimes a child eats what they are not given too. I was thinking of this in relation to the Eucharist. We are children of God.

We don't have all the answers yet. So trustfully we eat and drink what God said will nourish us, food that will give us eternal life. "The bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world," Jesus told us.

We are grateful for this gift. We celebrate it each time we come to Mass. And we thank God for it at such special times as Holy Hours and Eucharistic Devotions. I don't think I would have survived emotionally or spiritually without the 20 minutes I spend each day in church.

[Sister Ann and Carol Roosa will now speak, then I'll wrap it up.]

We are celebrating now in prayer and praise. Shortly we will go over to the cafeteria of school to continue celebrating God's many blessings. I have asked Sister Ann and Carol to speak now so we won't have any speeches during supper time. I just want everyone to enjoy the evening and the meal, uninterrupted. You will have to look around for the food. There are tables with food along three walls of the cafeteria and the drinks are in the hall. And please notice the pictures at the end of the hall. I do want to end with a special thank you to Ruthann Sammarco who, along with help from several others, coordinated the dinner, a special thank you to Deacon Jerry Yetter who is the server at our liturgy tonight and, who with Mary Ellen his wife helps me in so many other ways and a special thank you to Don Auberger and the choir for their inspiring ministry of song. And I want to thank my priest friends for coming and all of you for coming.

29th Sunday in Ordinary Time

October 20/21, 2007

INTRODUCTION - As Moses led God's people from Egypt, through the desert, to the Promised Land, they encountered numerous threats to their safety such as the army of Pharaoh, the Reed Sea they had to cross, the lack of water and food in the desert. One of the difficulties they had to face was opposition from those peoples whose lands they had to pass through. Today's reading speaks of an attack by Amalek, a desert tribe living south of the Dead Sea. Moses positioned himself on a nearby hill, holding his arms high in prayer with the staff of God in his hands. This is the same staff by which Moses worked such wonders in Egypt. His powerful prayer directly affected the outcome of the battle and his persistence in prayer resulted in victory. It is a good model of how Jesus tells us we should pray in today's gospel.

HOMILY – When I was growing up, children were forbidden for us to keep pestering our parents for something. When my mother or father said "no," especially my father, that was the end of any discussion. Jesus tells us with God the opposite is true. God doesn't mind being pestered; on the contrary, he prefers it. In the male dominated society of Jesus' day, widows had no significant social standing. It would not have been unusual for widows to be taken advantage of and for them to have little recourse. This widow's only recourse to justice was to pester the judge until he got tired of hearing from her. And so she did. Would she have struck him, literally

given him a black eye? Would she have hurt him by destroying his reputation? Or would she have just driven him crazy? There are various ways of interpreting the Greek verb here. The main point is clear. She was relentless in seeking a just settlement for herself. That's how we should pray.

Why does our Lord tell us to pray in that way? He, who knows how many hairs are on the top of our head, knows what we need. He hears every word we say, every thought we have, and he knows everything we need. He doesn't need reminders. He is infinite. He's not like the unjust judge who had little or no regard for the widow. He loves each of us more than we can begin to imagine. Meditate on the cross for proof of that. And he's not too busy. My dad would seldom pray for himself. He always said God has too many important things to worry about. He can't be worried about me. It sounds like an expression of humility, but in reality it is saying God is not infinite. That God is limited like we are and he can't handle everything he has to do. All these ideas add to the mystery of why he tells us to keep asking.

One can only speculate why God wants us to pester him. Maybe it's his way of getting to hear from some of us sometimes. Maybe it's his way of not letting us forget he is our Father and we depend totally on him. Maybe it's his way of trying to get us to enter into more of a relationship with him. Maybe it's his way of helping us know that what we ask for is truly what we want. Maybe it's his way of teaching us how to listen or how to solve our own problems. Maybe what we are praying for is too big of a request to happen quickly such as if we pray for the end of abortion or war. Too many hearts have to be changed before it happens and lots more prayers are needed before it can take place. Maybe prayer itself is a kind of spiritual power or energy that can affect what we are asking for. Just as a tiny seed has in it the energy of life and by planting seed life is released, so maybe when we pray, love or energy moves out of us and focuses itself like a laser on the person or event we are praying for. I suppose we could speculate all day, but one thing is clear, Jesus said don't quit praying.

Prayer is an act of faith in God and in God's love. Part of the reason people give up praying too soon is because they don't believe strongly enough. That's why I think Jesus said at the end of the gospel: "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" Part of the reason people give up is because we are too spoiled. If our refrigerator is broken, we get a new one. If we want to watch a certain program on TV, we just press a button. If we're hungry, we just pop an already prepared dinner in the microwave. If we want to hear good music, we turn on WGUC or turn on a CD. We blame God for not answering our prayers fast enough, but perhaps the problem is ours. We lack patience; we expect God to jump when we say jump.

I've thought of my own prayers. I ask for everything from being able to find a parking place when I'm in a hurry to good health to world peace. I pray for the safety of my friends and I pray for blessings on my parish and for the sick. I ask for help in the work I do. But I don't spend a lot of time asking for specific things. When I pray, it's a whole variety of things that go through my mind. I question God and wonder why God does what God does. I wonder what God is like. I reflect on Scripture. I thank God often and sometimes I just sit quietly with God. As long as we

don't quit praying, our prayer and our relationship with God will deepen. I know it will, and now we continue on praying the greatest prayer of all, the Mass. Amen.

30th Sunday in Ordinary Time

October 27/28, 2007

A very stern and humorless lady was not feeling well and made an appointment to see a doctor. The doctor began by asking his new patient some basic questions. "Do you drink at all?" "I never touch alcohol!" She said with great disdain. "Do you smoke?" "I never go near tobacco!" She was insulted by the question. "What about your sleeping habits?" "I go to bed early every night," she said haughtily. "I have no time for late-night partying and carousing. I am a busy woman. I am in bed by ten and up by six every morning." "I see," said the doctor, making notes on the chart. "Now exactly what's been the problem?" "I have been having terrible headaches," she said. "I think I see your problem," the doctor said. "your halo is too tight."

I wonder if the Pharisee in today's gospel had problems with headaches. Those who heard Jesus would have understood the parable up until the last line. Jesus' description of the Pharisee was accurate as well as his description of the tax collector. It was that last line that would have blown their minds: "The tax collector went home justified, the other did not." Pharisees were holy people. Their main desire in life was to live by God's law as perfectly as possible. It is certainly an admirable goal to follow God's law faithfully. Tax collectors were despised as among the worst of sinners. They were seen as traitors in that they collected taxes for the hated Romans who controlled the Holy Land in Jesus' day. More than that, they made their living on the taxes they collected and most likely they were not as honest as they should have been. As long as they gave the Roman Governor what was due, anything extra they managed to collect or extort was theirs. Some of them grew quite wealthy. In his parable Jesus was not trying to put down people who try to be good and applaud people who aren't. The parable is really all about prayer. Do you remember last week's gospel when Jesus told the story of the unjust judge and the poor widow who badgered him until she got a just settlement. It was a lesson in perseverance in prayer. Today he gives us another lesson in prayer.

At first it sounds as if the prayer of the Pharisee is a good prayer. It starts off with: "O God, I thank you..." Not a bad start. Thanking God should always be part of everyone's prayer. If we can honestly say we've been pretty decent people, that's a good thing to thank God for. I often thank God for the parents I had, the education I had and the faith I have. I would hate to think where I would have ended up without the values I've been taught and the opportunities and

grace God has given me. But if we examine the so called prayer of the Pharisee, we will see it is no prayer at all. Jesus tells us the Pharisee spoke this prayer to himself. He wasn't talking to God but to himself. His prayer was filled with self-pride (not giving God the credit for his virtuous life) and with contempt of others who were not as good as he thought he was. If he had really given God thanks for the help and grace he had received that aided him to become the good person he was, if he had said a prayer for the tax-collector who may not have received the same opportunities and blessings in life that the Pharisee had received, then that would have been a real prayer. But that's not the way it was. The tax-collector is the one who really prayed an honest prayer. He really connected with God in recognizing his own sinfulness and asking forgiveness. In honestly connecting with God he was justified; i.e., he was forgiven.

We only find this parable in St. Luke's gospel, which is sometimes referred to as the gospel of prayer. It tells us our prayer must be genuine, it must be honest, it must be humble. If the Pharisee wasn't such a pompous guy he probably would have been a pretty nice person. I'll bet his wife found him to be a royal pain. It's hard to live with someone who is perfect. I've tried to do marriage counseling with people like that. I wasn't very successful. Someone who thinks they are perfect is not only blind to their own faults, they are quite conscious of the faults of others and feel it is their duty to constantly point them out.

I could talk a long time about pride and humility, honesty and dishonesty, being judgmental, looking down on others, etc. but I won't. That would take another 45 minutes. We might just take a moment and ask ourselves "how do I pray?" To pray well we do not have to think of ourselves as no good, we do not have to sit in the back of church, we do not have to put ourselves down. We do have to be honest and humble, and if we've sinned, ask for forgiveness. Also at least once a week, if not more often, we need to spend some time recognizing how we've been blessed and saying "thanks" for all we've been given. We do that most perfectly in the Eucharist which we now celebrate. Amen