

Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time

June 22, 2008

INTRODUCTION

The prophet, Jeremiah lived in Israel about 600 years before Christ. The Babylonian destruction of Israel was imminent. The Babylonians came from modern day Iraq. Their capital, Babylon, was located just 100 miles south of Baghdad. Jeremiah was warning God's people that they could avoid the destruction that was on its way if they started living according to God's laws (most of which were being flagrantly ignored or violated). The people didn't like the message, so they decided to kill Jeremiah. His words in today's first reading reflect the pain and misery he experienced for being faithful to his mission. We should not be shocked when we hear him pray that God take vengeance on his persecutors. After all, he was human and not as perfect as Jesus who was able to pray for those who crucified him.

Our first reading leads into the gospel. As we heard last Sunday, Jesus had just chosen his twelve apostles. In today's gospel he prepares to send them out as missionaries. He is warning them their message will not always be well received, they may even suffer and die for it, but they must preach with courage and not be afraid of what might happen to them if they meet rejection.

HOMILY

Pope John Paul II had as his motto: "Be not afraid." Of course, he was quoting our Lord whom we just heard give the same mandate to his apostles in today's gospel, "Do not be afraid." Since God knows how many hairs are on our head and is aware when even a little sparrow dies, then he's aware of every detail of our own lives. Although he is aware, and cares, he does not guarantee us that bad things will not happen to us. Ups and downs are part of our existence and they even happened to God's holy prophets and to Jesus himself. Because God is aware and he cares he tells us not to fear, for he is in control and will make everything turn out right for those who are faithful to him.

"Be not afraid." Sometimes that's easier said than done. Fear is built into us and we feel it when we feel threatened. If fear were not a part of our nature, we wouldn't even exist today, because long ago our ancestors would not have had sense to get out of the way of charging wild animals, saber tooth tigers or poisonous snakes. Nor would we be moved to get out of the way of cars and trucks coming at us 50 miles an hour. Fear enables us to survive, to know when to fight, to know when to run. But sometimes it gets out of control and takes over our life, whether that fear comes from a real threat or an imagined one. Faith is a big help to deal with fear, and sharing our fears with a trusted friend can be helpful, but sometimes fear is so controlling that counseling or medication is required.

I think when Jesus tells us not to fear, he's not talking about the spontaneous reaction we feel when we are threatened, he's telling us not to worry and to put on trust in him that things will come out alright in the end. The words of St. Paul, "We know that all things work for good for

those who love God" (Rom 8,28), have been a constant help to me to stay together during very trying times. One thing Jesus does tell us to fear is God! "Do not be afraid of those who can kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather, be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in Gehenna." In Old Testament times Gehenna was a place of human sacrifice to pagan idols. At the time of Jesus it was a garbage dump, which was constantly burning. Thus Gehenna became the symbol of evil and hell. Jesus' words confuse some people! Aren't we supposed to love God, but if we fear him, how can we love him? Doesn't St. John tell us "perfect love casts out fear?" All of that is true. For those who have a "reward and punishment" view of life, a little fear might help them stay on the straight and narrow. For those who have moved beyond the "reward and punishment" stage, this fear that Jesus talks about is the fear of being unfaithful to God or having a sense of awe, respect and reverence when we approach God. Those who fear God in this way will approach him with awe, respect and reverence frequently. In either case, a little healthy fear of God will greatly reduce our fear of other things in life, including death itself.

I know from many years of dealing with people that if we are at peace with God and know the Lord is with us, there will be fewer things in life that can upset us or frighten us. Amen.

Feast of St. Peter & St. Paul

June 29, 2008

INTRODUCTION:

At 4:00 Mass:

Christ continues to feed and guide his people through the apostles. We see today how he does this through two of them, Peter and Paul. Peter, in today's first reading, shows us Jesus at work through him and John in healing a person crippled from birth. Peter's position as leader and chief shepherd of God's people is recognized in today's gospel. This was written long after Peter had been put to death, so it is not just Peter who is appointed chief shepherd, but those who would succeed him. We hear from St. Paul in the second reading. Paul was a powerful teacher and his mission was, to a large part, to the Gentiles. He recognized that fidelity to Christ did not require Gentiles to observe all of Jewish law with its feasts and rituals and sacrifices and dietary requirements. In today's second reading he is assuring his readers that he teaches with divine authority and has received backing from Peter (Cephas) and the other leaders of the early Church.

At Sunday Masses:

A society cannot survive without structure, organization and authority. Today's feast of the apostles, Peter and Paul, especially today's gospel, reminds us of the way Christ structured his Church with Peter as the head. When we hear this gospel, it might be worth knowing that it was written after Peter had already been put to death. St. Matthew wants us to know that it was a leadership position Jesus was creating when he made Peter the rock and gave him the keys of

the kingdom. It was not just a personal prerogative of Peter's. If it were personal only to Peter, who was dead by the time Matthew was writing, why would St. Matthew have made so much of it in his gospel?

I would like you to notice also in today's readings the theme of God helping those who put their trust in him. The first reading tells us how God rescued Peter from prison. The psalm that follows is the prayer of a person praising God for rescuing them from fear and danger. We could easily imagine Peter praying this psalm as he left prison. In the second reading Paul realizes he is approaching the end of his life and he praises God for all the ways he has been protected during his ministry.

HOMILY:

Today we celebrate the feast of Saints Peter and Paul. It is a very ancient feast going back to around the year 250 A.D. The two are honored because they are the two apostles about whom we know the most. They were the greatest influence on the Church at its beginning. Tradition has it they died together in Rome during the persecution of the Emperor Nero. Most historians suspect that Nero himself started the fire that burned most of Rome in order to clear out old houses and buildings to make room for his own ambitious building projects. Then he blamed the fire on the Christians in order to take suspicion off himself.

Peter was crucified upside down, again tradition has it that he did not consider himself worthy of dying in the same way his Master had died. Paul was beheaded. Although he was a Jew, he also was legally, by birth, a Roman citizen. Roman law decreed that Roman citizens could not be crucified because it was such a horrific way to die and being exempt from crucifixion was one of the perks of being a Roman citizen.

This year the spotlight is on St. Paul because the Holy Father proclaimed that the rest of this year and the first six months of next year be a year in honor of St. Paul. No one knows when he was born exactly, but scholars figure it was roughly 2000 years ago (give or take three or four years). So we are celebrating his 2000th birthday as closely as we can figure it.

We don't know if Paul ever saw Jesus in the flesh. Paul was born in Tarsus, a city in Asia Minor, which is now modern day Turkey. He spoke Greek and Aramaic and wrote all of his letters in Greek. He was a Pharisee and 1000 % dedicated to observance of Jewish law and traditions. Sometime after the death and resurrection of Jesus, he began persecuting the early followers of Christ. He was present at the martyrdom of St. Steven, the first martyr. He viewed those who believed in Jesus as heretics. He was such a zealous devotee to the Jewish Law that he would go looking for believers in Jesus to arrest them and prosecute them. It was on such a journey to Damascus that the Risen Christ spoke to Paul. Paul was enveloped in a bright light and fell to the ground. There is no mention of a horse, although people are used to saying he was thrown off his horse. This idea came from a painting of the event. I rather believe Paul was walking or riding a donkey, which was the usual means of transportation. He heard someone call him, and when he asked who was calling him, Jesus answered: "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting." Then Jesus said: "Now get up and go into the city and you will be told what you must do." Paul

got up but he was a new man. He was ill and blind for a few days until he was healed by one of Jesus' followers and was baptized. In his encounter with Jesus, he discovered Jesus was not a heretic and condemned criminal, but the glorified Lord who has risen from the dead and lives in his Church. He would learn that his mission would be to the Gentiles and that the good news Jesus proclaimed was to be preached to all people. This is when Paul became an Apostle for the word Apostle means one who has been sent. He would come to understand how we are saved by Jesus' death and resurrection and by our incorporation into this saving event through three things: 1) faith, 2) the sacraments, especially baptism and the Eucharist and 3) our love for one another.

Paul wrote more than any other New Testament author. One could keep on talking about him because he wrote so much. There is an insert in today's bulletin that says more about Paul. But to put everything succinctly, Paul's life and mission can be summed up in the one sentence Jesus spoke to him on the way to Damascus: "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting."

As I conclude, we might recall the most famous lines Paul wrote: "love is kind, love is patient, love is not jealous, it is not pompous, etc." ending with the sentence: "love never fails." The kind of love Paul talks about is a love that is rooted in Christ. We express that love as we gather here in faith today, giving God our time and worship and praying for one another. May we continue to express that same love for one another throughout the coming week.