

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

September 7, 2008

INTRODUCTION - (Ezekiel 33, 7-9) (Romans 13, 8-10) (Matthew 18, 15-20) Our first reading takes us back six hundred years before Christ as God explains to his prophet Ezekiel his responsibility as a prophet. Ezekiel must warn God's people of their sinful ways or he will be held accountable. It is a prelude to the gospel where Jesus instructs his followers how to help each other stay on the right track. St. Paul's teaching on love in our second reading reminds us that if we should try to correct one another it should be done out of love.

HOMILY – Each year, I always begin my introduction to our RCIA program with a lesson we can all learn from geese. I am borrowing these ideas from Chicken Soup for the Soul (Vol 2). When we see geese flying south at this time of year, there is a reason why they fly that way. As each bird flaps its wings, it creates an uplift for the bird immediately following. This uplift that is provided by the V formation allows the flock to get to their destination more quickly and easily. They are traveling on the thrust of one another. It would seem logical that people who share a common direction can reach their destination more quickly and easily by traveling together and supporting one another. Apparently God thinks this is good idea too, so he gave us the Church. We can more quickly and easily reach our home with him if we travel together. We have an excellent guide in this journey and it is Jesus for he tells us in today's gospel: "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them."

There's an attitude many have in society today that they don't need the Church. They can find God and love God on their own. Certainly we do have to come to know God in a personal way or our religion will simply be mechanical. But God in his wisdom gave us an important help to knowing him and serving him; that is, by being part of the Church, not just in name such as calling ourselves Christians, but by active participation in the Church.

There is another thing science knows about geese. When one of them falls out of formation, they quickly feel the drag and resistance of trying to go it alone and they get back into formation for the lifting power that is provided by the others. Unfortunately, when we humans try to go it alone spiritually, we are often slow to realize we are making no progress spiritually or we are even going in the wrong direction. If we have as much sense as a goose, we will stay connected with those people who are headed the same way we are. It's also interesting to note that if a bird gets sick or is injured, and falls out of formation, two others fall out with it and follow it down to give help and protection until it either gets well or dies. Then they will either launch out on their own or join a new formation until they can get back to their group. We have a responsibility to care for each other. St. Paul tells us today "owe nothing to anyone except to love one another for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law."

So, are you wondering why all this talk about Church? It's because our gospel today is about the Church. The word "church" (ἐκκλησία) is used over a hundred times in the Acts of the Apostles and in the Epistles of Paul. But our gospel today is only one of two places in all four of

the gospels where the word is used. It is used once when Jesus tells Peter (the rock) that he would build his Church on him. Then it is used here where the issue of a serious sin that would be harmful to the Church needs to be dealt with. Jesus is saying an effort is to be made to win the sinner back to unity with the community. First a pastoral approach is to be taken. A one-on-one conversation between the offender and a friend or pastoral leader might do the trick. If not, an effort is to be made with the support of other members of the community to restore the sinner to good standing in the community. As a last resort, because the sinner refuses these efforts by the community, he or she is to be treated as one outside the community, with the hope this will shock them into being part of the community once again. We can read in I Corinthians how Paul had to do this with a person in the Church of Corinth who was living a publicly scandalous life and who rejected any efforts people made to get him to change his ways. All of this that Jesus talks about is to be done out of love for the sinner whom Christ wants to bring back to unity with God. It is done out of love for the Church, so others are not seriously harmed by someone leading them off in a wrong direction. Christ supports this action on the part of the Church by his statement, "whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven."

Let me hasten to add this whole issue is not about a personal offense. Jesus deals with that a few verses later when Peter asks Jesus "if my brother sins against me, how often must I forgive him?" I'm sure we all remember the answer Jesus gave.

We differ from each other in many ways, yet we all have a common Father in heaven. We all have Christ as our savior who died to save us. We all wish to enjoy eternal life with God. The importance of working together, loving one another, supporting one another, praying for and with one another, cannot be overemphasized. As long as we follow Christ's lead and stay one with him and with each other in our journey, we will have all the help we need to get to where we want to go. We listen once again to Jesus' words in today's gospel: "where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." We trust in these words now as we continue to pray together the prayer he gave us at the Last Supper. Amen.

Feast of the Holy Cross

Sept. 14, 2008

INTRODUCTION: Our first reading takes us back over a thousand years before Christ, to the time when Moses was leading God's people from slavery in Egypt to the freedom of the Promised Land. The trip through the desert was extremely difficult and at times the people complained bitterly. One of their difficulties was an encounter with a nest of poisonous serpents whose bite brought intense suffering and burning pain and then death. The serpents were called saraph serpents, for saraph means "fiery." The people saw this as punishment for their complaining. But God gave them a way to be healed from the serpent's bite. The remedy might remind us of the symbol often used today as an icon of the medical profession. In today's gospel, Jesus compares this event to his crucifixion.

HOMILY : During Holy Week we focus on the sufferings of Christ crucified. Today our focus is more on the glory and victory of the cross. In Jesus' day the cross was an instrument of torture, brutality and shame. The Romans reserved it for the worse criminals and enemies of the Roman Empire. If a criminal was a Roman citizen, he or she was exempt from crucifixion because it was such a terrible way to die. Roman citizens were simply beheaded. But Jesus has turned the cross into a symbol of victory, a symbol of hope, a symbol of sacrifice and infinite love. St. Paul tells us in Galatians (2,20) "I live by faith in the Son of God who has loved me and given himself up for me."

Over and over the Scriptures tell us through the cross Jesus saved us, but early Christian art seldom pictured the cross. They didn't need to. Father Foley in Saint of the Day said: "It stood outside too many city walls, decorated only with decaying corpses, as a threat to anyone who defied Rome's authority." Included in this group of those who defied Rome's authority were the Christians who would not worship pagan gods, but only the Father, the Lord Jesus and the Spirit. The emperor Constantine who made Christianity legal in 313 also eliminated crucifixion as a form of capital punishment. Once the Roman Empire actually ceased crucifying people, then images of the cross appeared in Christian art. These first images of the cross did not include an image of the suffering Christ, but they were crosses decorated with jewels and precious metals. Incidentally it was a vision of the cross that led to the conversion of Constantine. He was assured in the vision that in the sign of the cross he would conquer Maxentius, a rival to the throne, and he would become emperor of Rome.

Once Constantine gained control of the Roman Empire, he went to the Holy Land with his mother, St. Helen, to discover the places where Jesus lived and died. Constantine and his mother had churches built in Bethlehem and the Mount of Olives but the most famous church he built is the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, built over the hill of Calvary and the tomb of Jesus. It was in the process of building the Church of the Holy Sepulcher that Jesus' cross was found. How did they know it was Jesus' cross? Legend has it that the men working on this project found three crosses and they didn't know which one was Jesus' cross. They touched each of the crosses to a woman who was dying and when she was touched with the third cross, she was instantly healed. Today's feast of the Holy Cross goes back to that time, around the year 320 AD. It celebrates the finding of the true cross and the dedication of the Basilica of the Holy Sepulcher. So that's why this feast is celebrated in the middle of September and not during Lent as we might expect.

Today's gospel is sometimes called the gospel in miniature. These few verses express the essence of the entire gospel: God's offer of eternal life through the sacrifice of Christ, a sacrifice offered out of love for us. God so loved the world, God so loved you and me that he gave us the greatest gift, the gift of his son, so we would know the greatest blessing: eternal happiness with him.

Today we approach the cross not with sorrow but with joy, not as a symbol of death but of life, not as a sign of defeat but of victory, not as a cause for fear but of hope, not as an instrument of

cruelty and hatred but of eternal love. On a practical level, I know somehow it was inevitable if Jesus were to be true to his mission. If he had run away from it, he would not have risen and his message would have soon been forgotten. Today Christians make up one third of the world's population. If Jesus had abandoned his mission to change the world through love, perhaps some obscure history book might have had a sentence or two about this person who did a lot of healing and was a good preacher, but for the most part his ministry would be forgotten. This is just a superficial explanation of the mystery of the cross. There is much more to this mystery, but each of us has to discover it for ourselves. To come to a deeper understanding takes lots of prayer – and that's what the Mass does for us each week, it reminds us of God's love and the hope and joy and freedom and peace and salvation it gives us. Amen.

25th Sunday in Ordinary Time

September 21, 2008

INTRODUCTION: (Isaiah 25, 6-9; Mt. 20, 1-16) When God's people were in exile in Babylon, they were as depressed as anyone could possibly be. They had lost everything. They were sure they had even lost God's love because of their sinfulness. Today we hear God's prophet assure them it is never too late to return to the Lord. Even though they knew they were not worthy of it, they will have God's mercy if they will reform their lives. God is forgiving, not because we are worthy, but because it is God's nature to be generous and forgiving. The theme of God's generosity prepares us for today's gospel.

HOMILY: Jesus' parables, as always, are designed to shock us into thinking. It's normal for us to feel the employer was unfair and that's exactly how Jesus knew we would feel. It is true, the owner was more generous with some than with others, but was he unfair with anyone?

In Jesus' society a laborer was paid at the end of the day and the normal pay was just enough for a person to feed his family for one day. Could it be that the owner of the vineyard was more generous with some so 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? Would that be unfair for the employer to do that? What do you think Jesus was trying to tell us?

The clue to understanding the parable is the first line where Jesus tells us this is what the kingdom of heaven is like. Jesus was telling us why he was always willing to reach out to sinners, something he was frequently criticized for doing. He wants us to know it's never too late to find God if we wish to. Remember the good thief whom Jesus forgave on the cross. If we've not been living right, though, does that mean we can wait until the last minute to straighten ourselves out? If we do we'll miss out on the joy of knowing God's love and presence in our lives right now and who knows whether we'll get the opportunity to repent at the last minute. I think it was St. Augustine who prayed: "God, make me good, but not right now!" Not a good prayer. Fortunately God paid attention only to the first part of the prayer (God, make me good),

and the Church was greatly blessed because God led Augustine from his wayward life to a life of holiness. "The usual daily wage" in the parable is a symbol for the immense happiness we will all have in God's kingdom. Some individuals may be closer to God because they served and loved God more faithfully than others, but we will all be equal in one way, whether we receive God's grace early or late in life, we will all be as happy as we can possibly be.

Jesus explained his forgiveness of sinners by this parable. St. Matthew found it helpful to use this same parable for a similar purpose when he wrote his gospel probably 50 or 60 years after Jesus preached it. During this period, many Jewish Christians, who had lived their whole lives faithful to God's law, had difficulty accepting new converts into the Church, converts coming from paganism, who represented those who came late to the vineyard. The parable was meant to help Jewish Christians welcome those who came to know Christ later in life and accept them as equals in God's kingdom.

Today we have no problem with these ideas. We are always happy to see people turn their lives toward God, whether they had strayed away at some time in their lives and came back, or whether for the first time, even late in life, they become believers in Christ and join his Church. But there may be a couple of ideas that are relevant for us today. First of all, the people who worked all day complained about unfair treatment. Is Jesus telling us we shouldn't complain when we feel we've been treated unfairly? Well, sometimes complaining is good. It sometimes helps get things done, it helps us get things off our chest, it may help us clarify our thoughts and come to realize we haven't been treated too badly after all. If people didn't complain, counselors and psychologists and doctors would not be able to help people. Politicians wouldn't have anything to do. Friends and family members wouldn't be able to give support and sympathy to each other if they didn't know how their friend or family member hurt. Complaining can be positive, but we have to be careful not to make it a way of life. If we want to complain, it helps to stop and count our blessings and we might realize God has treated us far better than any of us deserve!

The other idea today's parable connects with is envy. Envy makes us miserable. Envy is when we look around at others and think they have much more than we do, they have had more breaks in life than we have, etc. We feel life is not fair and we are depressed over it. I believe God is more than fair with all of us. If we want to compare ourselves with others, we need to compare ourselves also with those who have not been as blessed as we have. Always wanting more may motivate us to achieve in life, but it can also be a formula for constant unhappiness. We need to always focus on the positive, on our blessings and give thanks. I always preach that the key to joy in life is gratitude. God's ways are not our ways, Isaiah tells us. Part of the joy of eternity will be praising God for his abundant love and goodness to us. The "Eucharist" which we pray now, a word which means "thanksgiving," is the most perfect way to do that. Amen.

26th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Sept. 28, 2008

INTRODUCTION – (Ezekiel 18, 25-28) (Matthew 21, 28-32) In 587 B.C. when the Babylonians conquered the Jews, destroyed their cities and their Temple, and made the Jews who were still alive after the conquest into their slaves, the Jews concluded they were being punished for the sins of previous generations. They complained that God was not fair. In today's first reading from Ezekiel, God addresses the Jews in exile instructing them that their own refusal to hear God's prophets and to follow God's laws led them to the disaster they were suffering. But, God says, the situation was not hopeless. They could always turn back to God if they wanted. This reading prepares us for the gospel where we hear a similar message. If we have damaged our relationship with God, we can always turn back.

HOMILY – Jesus asks for our thoughts about the story we just heard in St. Matthew's gospel. "What do you think of this? A man had two sons." I do not want to confuse things, but I wonder if you remember another parable that begins: "A man had two sons." This other parable is in St. Luke and if you do not know which one it is, it is the story of the prodigal son. The older son was an obedient and hard working son. The younger decided he wanted his share of the inheritance so he could get off the farm and go have lots of fun in the big city. After he spent all his inheritance, he realized what a fool he had made of himself and came home to a most loving and forgiving father. Today's gospel from Matthew is somewhat similar. There are two sons. In Matthew's story the father had a problem with both of his sons. However, the son who said "no" to his father realized he made a mistake and changed his mind. That is key to understanding both parables. The prodigal son and the son who told his father "I will not" in today's gospel both had a change of heart. The son in today's parable who said "no" to his father wasn't as bad as the son who blew away half his father's money. It may not sound like a big deal in today's culture - a lot of kids have no trouble saying "no." But when I was growing up, it was close to committing suicide to say "I will not" to my father. After his change of heart, the son was soon working side by side with his father in the vineyard and was back in his father's good graces.

Jesus' point, in both of these parables as in everything he taught us, is it's never too late to change our mind if we have not been living the way God wants us to. Ezekiel had the same message in today's first reading. He told the Jews in exile to take responsibility for what they did and stop making excuses or blaming someone else.

We live in a world where anything we've ever done can come back to haunt us. If we were a goof off in school, if we got in trouble with the law, smoked pot, got a traffic ticket, had to declare bankruptcy, robbed a bank or whatever, it's all there in someone's memory and perhaps in public records. Especially if we tried to run for public office. The media would let the world know everything we did, and everything anyone related to us did as well. To some extent that makes sense. What a person did in the past tells a lot about their character and may be a predictor or what they'll do in the future. It's the only basis on which we can evaluate someone, to decide whether we want them as our president, or our friend or our doctor or financial advisor or

someone we can trust with our children. But God judges us differently and that's because he can see what kind of person we are right now. If we've been bad and decide to change, he sees our change of heart. Conversely, if we've been good and decide otherwise, he sees that too. Today's gospel tells us no matter what we've done in the past, it's where we are now that matters with God. It's a message that brings healing and peace if we've made mistakes in the past (and who hasn't because we're all sinners). I have a little story to tell that I love. I got it from Scott Peck. There was a lady who claimed that Jesus was appearing to her. And she went to tell her bishop about it. He was skeptical and said he wanted some proof it was happening. So he told her that the next time Jesus appeared to her she was to ask Jesus what the bishop confessed the last time he went to confession. The next time she saw the bishop he asked her to report on what happened. Did she ask Jesus what the bishop said the last time he went to confession? She did ask she said. "And what did he answer?" the bishop asked. She said he forgot. Scott Peck said that was a genuine vision or the lady was a pretty smart cookie because that's the way it is with God: when we repent and change our hearts, God forgets the past. It brings healing and peace to know that we can change and God gives us a chance to start over. The message in today's gospel should also shake a few people out of their spiritual lethargy if they, like the son who didn't show up at work, say to themselves it doesn't matter how I live or what I do, God won't notice. Yes God will.

As I conclude, let us return to another lesson from the parable of the prodigal son. There were two sons. Remember the older son was very responsible. He worked hard on the farm. He never did anything to displease his father, but he resented his father for welcoming his younger brother back and celebrating when he returned. The older son lacked compassion. God wants us to be responsible, hard working, obedient and faithful and we will be blessed. He wants us to say "yes" and be willing to follow him when he calls, that is the point of today's gospel. He wants us to have a compassionate heart as well: "have in you the same attitude that is also in Christ Jesus," St. Paul tells us in today's second reading. When Jesus asks in today's gospel: "What is your opinion?" he is asking what kind of son or daughter are you and am I. Are we like any of these sons we heard about today. Or are we like Christ, the faithful Son who always says "yes" to the Father and goes to work doing what he asks of us. If we're lots of talk and offer lots of excuses and blame others for why we don't do what God wants, God can see right through us and it will get us nowhere. If we've said "no" to the Father, we can change our mind. If we feel we've been pretty faithful to God throughout our lives, trying to always say "yes" and doing what God wants, then there are a few things we need to pray for: pray to be humble, thank him for the graces he's given us, pray for the grace to remain close to him, pray for those who have forgotten about God and ask for a heart that does not hold grudges. Amen