

## Fourteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time

July 5, 2009

**INTRODUCTION** – Ezekiel 2, 2-5; II Cor. 12, 7-10; Mark 6, 1-6

Sometimes prophets predicted the future, but most of the time their task was to remind God's people of how God wanted them to live. Their efforts to do so were not always appreciated by the people who heard their message. The prophet Ezekiel lived about 600 years before Christ. He had to warn the people of the great destruction that was soon to come if they did not change their ways. We hear in today's first reading God cautioning Ezekiel that as a prophet he would not have an easy job of it. The passage prepares us for the gospel that tells of Jesus, the greatest prophet of all, who was rejected by his own people when he came to preach in his hometown of Nazareth.

**HOMILY** – At times we all have put people on a pedestal who ended up disappointing us and we've looked down upon people who were much better off than we are. I've done that many times. An example of this came to me as I was reading the newspaper about Bernard Madoff. Madoff swindled thousands of people out of billions of dollars and you may have heard that this week he was sentenced to 150 years in prison. Sometimes there is justice. My point is that at the end of the article there was a statement from his wife who said: "The man who committed this horrible fraud is not the man whom I have known for all these years." Sometimes we think we know someone and we really don't.

In Jesus' case his family, friends and neighbors thought they knew him. In their estimation he was just one of them, a day laborer turned preacher. He didn't belong to the priestly class or have an extensive formal education in Jerusalem like other religious leaders. Maybe a few were impressed, but most couldn't believe he was anyone special, in spite of the stories that were being told about him and the wondrous things he was doing. St. Mark tells us he couldn't do much to help any of them. This is a powerful statement and we find it only in St. Mark: "he was not able to perform any mighty deeds there, apart from curing a few sick people..." The message is obvious: a lack of faith actually prevents God from helping us as he would like.

The lesson for us in this gospel is that we have to be careful not to tell ourselves that we know who Jesus is. Oh, we know some things about Jesus. We learned them from our parents, we learned them in school, we learned them in the bible, we learned them in church. We profess our faith in Jesus every Sunday, and so we think we know all about Jesus.

St. John of the Cross, a sixteenth century mystic, would tell us no matter what we know about Jesus, it is hardly just the beginning. He said Jesus "is like a rich mine with many pockets containing treasures: however deep we dig we will never find their end or their limit. Indeed, in every pocket new seams of fresh riches are discovered on all sides."

The people I have met who are convinced they know all they need to know about Jesus are those who know him least. How do we come to know who Jesus is? To build on what we

already know, we constantly need prayer, the sacraments (especially the Eucharist) and service to others. We do need all three of these: prayer, sacraments and service to others. Any one of these three alone does not work very well without the other two.

As I preach this I have to confess that for all the theology and scripture I have studied, for all the time I spend in church, I'm not necessarily any better than anyone else in really knowing our Lord. More often than I would like to admit, I say my prayers with not enough attention to what I'm saying, I receive Communion with my mind on a half dozen other things. I just pray that the Lord is merciful to me, because I do try to give him my love and to know him better.

That's part of the reason we are here today, to get to know Jesus better than we already do. Today is Independence Day. Today we celebrate our freedom. More and more it seems to me today's culture believes freedom means doing whatever you want. More and more our citizens seem to think freedom means freedom from God and what God wants us to do or not do. We see it in statistics of how people are taking their religion less and less seriously. If you want to do something for our Country, start inviting a friend who does not come to church much to come to Mass with you. Maybe they will discover God's love more deeply. I hope you all have a great holiday. I hope that as you celebrate today you will pause to be grateful to God, the source of freedom, and to be grateful to those who have gone before us in this life who have entrusted to us the freedom and the blessings we enjoy. Amen.

## **Fifteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time**

**July 12, 2009**

### **INTRODUCTION –**

Last week, in reference to the prophet Ezekiel, I commented that sometimes prophets predicted the future but most of the time they tried to direct God's people to live by God's laws. Consequently, they were not usually appreciated. Today, in our first reading, we hear from the prophet Amos who lived over 700 years before Christ. In that culture were professional prophets who made a nice living from telling people how to solve their problems, giving them advice, predicting the future, etc. Usually these professionals did not speak for God, rather they spoke the kinds of things their clients would be pleased with hearing. If they offered any criticism or anything offensive they would not have been paid their fee. When Amos went to Bethel, a place of worship in the north, which was established in competition with the true Temple in Jerusalem, Amos did not have warm fuzzy things to say about the way God's people were living. The high priest, Amaziah, mistook him for one of the professional prophets and told him to go back home and prophesy. Amos protested that he was not a career prophet, rather he was living a nice peaceful life as a farmer and God called him to go to Bethel and warn the people that their sinful lives would lead to destruction. Today's passage prepares the way for the gospel where Jesus sends his apostles out to preach and warns them they may not always be welcome.

## HOMILY -

Amos claimed that he was sent by God to preach. It wasn't something he decided to do on his own, nor did he intend to make himself rich doing it. Because the high priest there had the king and his army on his side, it's most likely that the high priest succeeded in throwing Amos out of town. The job of telling people they need to repent is about as much fun as telling people to cut off their right hand. It seldom happens. John the Baptist had some success in preaching repentance, but we all know how he was eventually beheaded. St. Mark tells us in today's gospel how Jesus sent the Twelve out to preach repentance, to cast out demons, and to heal the sick. It's from the fact that they had been sent out that they get the title of apostle. That's what the Greek word "apostolos" means, one who has been sent out.

Like a mother bird teaching its little ones to fly, Jesus was giving his apostles their first lessons in the work they would later do when he was no longer with them in physical form. In doing God's work, Jesus was obviously insisting they learn to trust in God for what they needed. He instructed them to bring nothing with them except the clothes they were wearing. Jesus seems to stress their living a simple life style almost as much as he stresses the message they are to bring. My suspicion too is that the apostles were probably going to be away for a short period of time. If they had to be gone for months, they would have needed a few more things. For example, when Paul was traveling, he had to bring books and the tools of his trade as a tent maker and enough clothes because it was bitterly cold in the areas where he evangelized.

I wonder whether the idea Jesus had of the apostles not taking too much stuff along when they went out to preach might also apply to how many ideas a person should try to stuff into a homily. I was on retreat last week and I had all week to think about this gospel. I had lots of things I wanted to say. When I was putting my homily together, I had hoped to say something about the priesthood, since this year has been proclaimed by the Holy Father as the year of the priest. When I started putting all my thoughts on paper, it left little room to say much about priests. I do want to say, however, I feel very strongly that I've had a call and have been sent out. It is very gratifying when I discover something I've said or done has brought a person closer to God. But sometimes there is rejection as well. It's a delicate thing to know what to say when you want to lead a person to do the right thing. I don't want to face God who might say to me, "you should have said something," and at the same time I don't want to alienate a person totally. That is one of the hardest things about being a priest. I'm sure many of you parents and grandparents face the same dilemma. As I said earlier, asking someone to stop doing something they shouldn't or to start doing something they should is at times like asking them to cut off their right hand. In this year of priests, I hope you will remember to pray for priests. There is an insert in today's bulletin about the priesthood, so you can read more about it if you choose.

There is one last point I want to make. Jesus' apostles were sent to heal the sick who they anointed with oil. Mark's gospel and the Letter of James give us the basis for the sacrament of the sick. There are people, some saints for example, who have a special gift of healing, but the sacrament of the sick has a special power in and of itself, independent of the holiness of the

priest. We've not offered the sacrament lately, so if anyone would like to receive it after Mass today, I will be available. Amen.

## **Sixteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time**

**July 19, 2009**

### **HOMILY**

There was a man who worked in a museum whose job it was to explain the different exhibits. On one occasion he pointed to the bones of a dinosaur saying the bones were 100 million and 9 years old. Someone asked how they could date those bones so accurately. He said "well, when I started working here, I was told these bones were 100 million years old and I've worked here for nine years."

Today I want to give everyone a little history lesson. I'm not going back to the dinosaurs, but I am going back pretty far – to King David, 1000 years before Christ. When I was in school, I hated history. It wasn't until we studied the history of the Old Testament in the seminary that I began to appreciate it. I cannot cram 1000 years of history into a couple of minutes. I just want to touch on the parts of Jewish history that are mentioned in today's reading. If you want to learn more, read everything in the Old Testament, but be sure you have a commentary to help you. Otherwise, you'll give up in despair because you won't know what it's all about - especially the prophets and the historical books.

When David was king 1000 years before Christ, David wanted to build a house for God, since there was no Temple for God at that time. God did not give David permission to do so, however God promised David through the prophet Nathan that he would bless him and build David a house in the sense that David's kingdom would continue forever and one of his descendants would always rule. This blessing lasted through the reign of David's son, Solomon; but we humans somehow have the ability to sabotage God's blessings. Solomon turned to pagan gods and over-extended the country financially by elaborate building projects and exorbitant taxes, so when Solomon died there was a rebellion and most of Israel broke away from Solomon's successor, David's grandson, Rehoboam. Rehoboam continued to rule over the southern part of Israel, the area we know as Judaea . For 400 years (and this is amazing) the kings of Judaea were descendants of King David. The northern kingdom that rebelled against David's successors suffered under a succession of kings and rebellions. In less than 300 years the northern kingdom was destroyed by the Assyrians, people from northern Iraq. About 100 years after that, the Babylonians from southern Iraq conquered the Assyrians and took control of the entire Middle East. The conquest of the Babylonians brings us up to Jeremiah whom we heard in today's first reading. At the time of Jeremiah, here was the situation: the northern kingdom no longer existed. The southern kingdom, Judaea, was still being ruled by David's descendants but they were not loyal to God or to God's laws. Jeremiah spoke to these kings as they came into power, the last four being: Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, Jehoiakin and Zedekiah. Zedekiah, the last

reigning king, died in disgrace. After the Babylonians captured him, his sons were slaughtered before his eyes, he was then blinded and led off to Babylon in chains where he presumably died. You can read how Jeremiah spoke with them in great detail in the book of Jeremiah. He told them exactly what they needed to do to survive the invading forces of Babylon. His messages were ignored. He blames them and their leadership for the destruction that came upon God's people. As we heard in today's first reading, God speaks through Jeremiah: "Woe to the shepherds who mislead and scatter the flock of my pasture." God said he would take over shepherding his people; he would bring them back from exile; he would appoint leaders over them who would serve them well and lead them to peace and security. It took 600 years before God thought the world was ready for this king who would reign and govern wisely, who would do what is just and right in the land.

But then he came, through the announcement of an angel to a virgin who was engaged to a man named Joseph of the house of David, and the virgin's name was Mary. And the angel said to her "Do not be afraid Mary, for you have found favor with God. Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father, and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever, and of his Kingdom there will be no end."

In last week's gospel, Jesus sent his apostles out to heal and cast out demons and to call people to repentance. In today's gospel we are told of their return, excited over their experience and tired. Jesus wanted to some time off, but he couldn't. The mission of Jesus and his apostles apparently was so successful that a great crowd caught up with them before they had chance to catch their breath. Mark describes Jesus taking compassion on them (his heart was moved with deep sympathy for them would probably be a better translation). He saw them as sheep without a shepherd, - people without leadership, and he began to teach them.

One of the important messages in today's readings is that in love our Lord leads us, by teaching us and appointing others to teach us. But we need to listen, and we need to keep on listening. We'll never be finished listening and learning as long as our world suffers from injustice, poverty, hunger, discrimination, war, hatred and killing of innocent people. Christ would be put to death before he would stop teaching. It is to our own great loss when we stop listening. That's one of the reasons we are here each weekend, to listen and to learn. We call ourselves disciples. The word disciple means learner. When we've quit learning, we've quit being a disciple.

## **Seventeenth Sunday of Ordinary Time**

**July 26, 2009**

We have been reading from St. Mark's gospel this year. In our gospel last Sunday, Mark told us about Jesus and the apostles needing to get away after a period of intense ministry. They got in

a boat to go to a deserted area where they could rest awhile. However, the people figured out where they were going and got there ahead of them. Jesus, moved with compassion, realized their need for leadership and responded to the crowd by teaching them.

Then the disciples notice the day is getting late and the people need to eat, so they ask Jesus to send the people away so they can buy some food at nearby farms and villages. Jesus told the disciples to go ahead and feed the people. The apostles protest that would be impossible. Jesus asks how much food they have. Without mentioning a young boy, the apostles report they have five loaves and two fish. With these Jesus feeds 5000. Matthew gives us the detail that it was 5000 men, plus all the women and children. Incidentally, this is the only miracle of Jesus (other than the resurrection) that is recorded in all four gospels (and Matthew and Mark tell us about Jesus feeding a great crowd miraculously a second time). It must have been an awesome event to have been spoken of six times in the gospels. The first three gospels only hint at the Eucharistic implications of this miracle, but John elaborates on it at length. The lectionary switches over to St. John's gospel (the 6th chapter) at this point. I love St. John best among all the gospels and this is one of my favorite chapters in St. John. We'll be reading from this chapter in John until the end of August when we will go back again to St. Mark.

John has a few interesting details that differ from the other gospels. John tells us Jesus and the apostles had already arrived at the place where Jesus fed the people and the people followed him there. It's easy to imagine that some people did arrive before Jesus did and many others came afterwards.

Another detail is that in John Jesus had already anticipated feeding the people when he saw them coming to him. He didn't need to be advised by the apostles that the people might be hungry. He knew in his heart what he was going to do. In John's gospel Jesus is always in control of the situation.

The detail about the boy who was willing to share his small meal (five loaves and two fish) is a beautiful image – as well as a meaningful one. John alone tells us it was barley loaves. This was the bread that the poor ate. This detail shows us the importance of sharing. In today's world God continues to feed six billion people with enough food, but we're not doing very good in sharing what we have. For all kinds of reasons, many people suffer starvation while many others suffer from diseases triggered by having too much to eat. I think the image of the boy who shared his small meal is also an image that whatever we are willing to give to God will come back to us many times over. It took trust on the part of the boy to share the little he had. It takes trust to give over to God the little we feel we have to offer in terms of time, talent or treasure, but it works. God can do a lot with the little we are willing to give.

John tells us Jesus gave thanks over the loaves and fish. I might point out that the Greek verb to give thanks is "eucharisteo." Right from the beginning of chapter six, John links the feeding of the multitude with the eucharist. The eucharistic theme is also hinted at in the command of Jesus, given in all the gospels, to gather the fragments together. Notice in the gathering of fragments it only mentions the loaves. The fish are no longer an important item.

There are twelve baskets left over, not a coincidence that there are twelve apostles. Symbolically they would be the ones to take the bread of life to the world.

One important word here is the word “sign.” John does not call it a miracle, but a “sign” which means what Jesus did points to something else. Picture a world without signs. It would be impossible to picture. Signs are what we use to communicate: from body language, to street signs, to words themselves. God speaks to us through signs too. Many of us perhaps remember the definition of a sacrament: “an outward sign...” In the next few weeks, we will learn in depth what Jesus was telling the crowd and was telling us in this sign. Amen.