

Fifth Sunday of Ordinary Time

February 7, 2010

INTRODUCTION

Our first reading is one of my favorite Old Testament readings. It is from the prophet Isaiah who lived about 725 years before Christ. He describes his call from God to be a prophet. The setting is in Jerusalem in the Temple. Notice he is unable to describe what God looks like. He describes God's royal robe, the angels, the sounds and the profound sense of God's holiness. In this experience he becomes aware of his own unworthiness. You will recognize in this passage the inspiration for two familiar hymns: the Holy, Holy, which we say or sing at every Mass and the hymn, Here I Am, Lord.

In the other two readings we hear how two other people experienced God in Jesus Christ: Paul in his vision of the Risen Christ and Peter in the miraculous catch of fish.

HOMILY

Several years ago, Rabbi Joseph Telushkin wrote a little book called Jewish Humor: What the Best Jewish Jokes Say about the Jews. In it he tells this story: A man takes some very fine material to a tailor and asks the tailor to make him a pair of pants. He goes back a week later, but the pants are not ready. Two weeks go by, and still the pants are not ready. Finally, after six weeks, the pants are ready. The man tries them, and they fit perfectly. As he pays for them, he says to the tailor, "It took God only six days to make the world. And it took you six weeks to make just one pair of pants." "Yes," said the tailor, "but look at the pair of pants (perfect!) and look at the world (it's a mess)." The tailor was hinting that perhaps God would have done a better job if he weren't in so much of a hurry.

I wonder if the tailor ever read his bible. It tells us from the very beginning all that God made was good. God, moreover, put his human creatures in the garden of Eden, a paradise that would be a source of every delight. But God's first human creatures rebelled against God and destroyed the harmony and joy God had blessed them with. Somehow we, the children of those first humans, continue to follow their example. So if the world is in a mess, the bible is telling us, don't blame God. We humans have created that mess ourselves.

Maybe God really didn't create the world in six days. After all the bible is not trying to teach science. It's trying to tell us that God made all things, not how. You may have heard the story that after God made Adam, and Adam was in the Garden of Eden for a while, God asked Adam how things were going. Adam told God he was enjoying everything, but he felt something was missing. God said, how about if I create a companion for you, someone you can put your arms around, someone who will laugh at your jokes, listen to your stories, who will give you no hassle and will cater to your every whim. Adam thought that would be great. God said it will cost you an arm and a leg. Adam thought for a few moments, then asked God, what can I get for a rib.

We know there is a lot of symbolism in the two creation accounts of Genesis. For example, men are not going around with a rib missing. The six days of creation is also symbolic. Scholars tell us this account of creation was written by a priest who was trying to teach his people, among other things, that they were to keep holy the Sabbath. Even God rested on the Sabbath. Actually God doesn't get tired and his work of creation is ongoing. Astronomy has discovered that new stars are forming all the time. New human beings are coming into the world all the time. Even Jesus told the Jewish leaders after one of his miracles: "My father is at work until now, so I am at work." (Jn 5, 17). We heard how God is at work making the world better through his prophet, Isaiah. God appeared to Isaiah, and purified his lips so that he could proclaim God's message to God's people. God was at work through St. Paul in today's second reading proclaiming the resurrection. I would like to expand on this passage a little more. Paul's letter is one of the earliest writings in the New Testament, written about the year 56 or 57 (about 14 years before the first gospel was written), thus it is a very important testimony to the faith of the early Church. The Corinthians were having a problem accepting the idea of the resurrection of the body. They thought our body came back to life with the same problems, weaknesses, and flaws it had before we died. They thought their spirits would be freer without their bodies. That's not so, Paul said. He tells them "what I handed on to you, as of first importance, I also received." Because it is such an important doctrine, Paul dedicated the whole last part of his letter to the resurrection. Notice the kind of language he uses to indicate this is the Tradition of the Church: "I handed on to you...what I also received." That is, this is what the Church always believed about Jesus, that although he was put to death, his body now lives and he is seated at the right hand of God the Father. Paul goes on (beyond today's passage) to explain how we too shall rise to new life with him. It is a new world God is creating, in the risen Lord Jesus. That's where our gospel comes in: Peter and the apostles, who were among the many who visibly saw Jesus after his resurrection, would now be catching people, Jesus told Peter. They would be bringing people into God's perfect Kingdom, leading them through baptism and the Eucharist to a new life, eternal life, where there would be no more pain or suffering or even death.

When we look around and see that the world is in terrible shape, let us not lose hope. God hasn't abandoned us, rather God continues to send people who will help to establish his eternal Kingdom, people like Isaiah, people like Paul, people like Peter and the apostles, people like you and me. Amen.

Sixth Sunday – Ordinary Time

February 14, 2010

INTRODUCTION: (Jeremiah 17,5-8; I Cor. 15,12.16-20; Lk. 6,17.20-26) Today we hear from the prophet Jeremiah. He lived during the final years before the Babylonians destroyed the land of Judah, Jerusalem, the Temple, and took most of its citizens off as captives and slaves to Babylon. If you read Jeremiah, you will see how God constantly called God's people back to fidelity to their Jewish faith and how they always turned their back on God and relied on their

own human resources. Today we hear part of one of Jeremiah's homilies where he reminds God's people that their only hope of survival was in God. Jeremiah was ignored, hated, punished, and almost put to death for preaching God's Word, but he could not stop for he was totally committed to God's work and he found strength in God's power.

HOMILY: On this Valentine's Day I would like to offer a couple of stories about loving spouses. The first is about a woman whose van was buried in the family driveway. Her husband came to her rescue, digging her out, rocking the van and pushing her free. As she was driving down the road she heard an unusual noise. She got on her cell phone and called home. When her husband answered the phone she said: "Thank God you answered, there was some horrible sound coming from under the van. For a moment I thought I was dragging you down the highway." "And you didn't stop?" he asked. I'm sure in his love he gave her a valentine anyway.

The second takes place in a church where the people offer spontaneous intentions at the intercession time. One man, Bob, asked for prayers for himself and his wife on their 37th anniversary. At the obvious nudging of his wife he corrected that to 38th anniversary. As the chuckling died down, heard from the back of church was, "I'd like to offer a prayer for Bob." (both stories are from Reader's Digest, Laughter the Best Medicine –pg 153)

St. Valentine, the patron saint of lovers, was a Roman priest, physician and martyr who was put to death sometime around 270 A.D. A basilica was built on the spot where he was buried some years later after the emperor Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the empire. The custom of sending a "Valentine" to a loved one stems from the medieval belief that birds choose their mates on this day. It's unfortunate we need reminders to tell those we love that we love them. I always encourage married couples to tell one another that they love each other.

Jeremiah is telling us there are only two ways to live our lives: trusting in God and faithfully following him or trying to make our own way through life while ignoring the direction and the grace God gives us. The reading from Jeremiah, telling us how to find true happiness in life, prepared the way for the gospel where Jesus preaches the beatitudes. Beatitude is a word that means blessed or happy. Luke and Matthew have two different versions of the beatitudes. In Luke we hear four beatitudes and four conditions that begin with the word "woe," an expression denoting pain or displeasure, hardship or distress. Matthew has eight beatitudes. Luke is speaking to a distinct audience who in fact were poor, hungry and downcast at times, under the oppression of a foreign power. Some of those who were the oppressors were the ones who were exploiting the poor and having a good time at their expense. Matthew has Jesus speaking to a more general audience when he said "Blessed are the poor in spirit..." Neither is saying that being poor is a blessing and having wealth is evil. Some of Jesus' friends were wealthy, at least by the standards of the time. In both Matthew and Luke, Jesus is telling us through the beatitudes there will come a time when things will be reversed for the poor, the sorrowing, the hungry, the oppressed. In both gospels the beatitudes look forward to a blessedness that is to come, which begins here and now for all who follow Christ faithfully.

This is what St. Paul is telling us in the second reading. The Corinthians had difficulty believing

in the resurrection. But Paul tells them our whole faith, our whole salvation, our whole Christian way of life begins and is founded on the resurrection of Jesus. Not only that but we who have followed Christ will share in his resurrection. Jesus was the first fruits, that is, the first indication of what God has planned for all who love him and serve him. At Mass we commemorate his death and resurrection which promise us new life. Amen.

First Sunday of Lent

February 21, 2010

INTRODUCTION: (Deut. 26,4-10; Rom. 10,8-13; Lk.4,1-13) In our first reading from Deuteronomy, we hear Moses instructing the people in the proper way to offer God thanks and praise for their freedom and for the land God had given them. In gratitude for their blessings, they were to offer their tithes to the Lord - one tenth of the fruits of their land. Along with their offering they would profess they were once a people without freedom or land, and they would now bring their offering in gratitude for all the ways God had blessed them. The reading prepares us for the gospel where Satan tries to tempt Jesus into worshipping him so as to gain power over all earthly kingdoms. Jesus' answer comes from another part of the book of Deuteronomy which says, "You shall worship the Lord your God and him alone shall you serve." (Deut. 6,13)

HOMILY: You may have heard this story before. A man named Paddy (which is short for Patrick) came from Ireland to Boston. In a very short time, he began the practice of going to the local bar after work and ordering three beers. He wanted them served to him all at once. After a few weeks the bartender asked Paddy why he insisted having all three beers served at the same time. He explained that when he lived in Ireland, he and his two brothers always got together after work for a beer. He wanted to keep the spirit of their getting together even though they still lived across the sea. A few months went by and one day Paddy came in and ordered just two beers. The bartender was concerned and asked if something happened to one of his brothers. Paddy said "No, it's nothing like that. You see it's Lent now and I've given up beer for Lent."

Every year on the first Sunday of Lent, we hear about Jesus going into the wilderness for 40 days to fast and pray. This gospel is meant to inspire us to make these next 40 days a spiritual preparation for Easter through prayer and sacrifice. Paddy had the idea that this is a time of sacrifice, but he wasn't going to overdo it!

There are an infinite number of things we can do to make these days special. Our goal can be to give up something such as actions or habits or attitudes that get in our way as we try to love God and others, or our goal can be positive as we try to do things that can help us grow in our love for God and for others.

Notice at the beginning of our gospel reading today, St. Luke tells us Jesus was filled with the Holy Spirit. Jesus had just been baptized in the Jordan by John the Baptist and the Holy Spirit had descended upon him. But that didn't prevent the devil from showing up. Everyone is tested by temptation and sometimes we're tested the most right after we make a decision to be a better person and to love and serve God more faithfully. Temptation doesn't necessarily come from the devil; the world and the flesh provide enough temptation in our lives too. No one is so holy that they will not be tempted. Luke's gospel tells us at the end the devil departed from him "for a time." The devil doesn't rest as St. Peter tells us.

I would like to briefly comment on Jesus' three temptations. 1) Jesus' first temptation was to use his uniquely miraculous power for his own benefit: "turn these stones into bread." But Jesus came to serve and he reserved his special power to help others. 2) The devil then told Jesus all earthly kingdoms belonged to him and he would turn them over to Jesus if Jesus would worship him. The devil is noted for telling big lies. Jesus called the devil the "father of lies" in John's gospel (Jn. 8,44) and he did not fall for the devil's deception. 3) Then the devil took Jesus to the top of the Temple and told him to jump for nothing would happen to him if he were the Son of God. In Matthew's gospel this is the second temptation; however, Luke makes it the third, probably because the Temple is so important in the structure of Luke's gospel. If those who were in the Temple area were to see Jesus slowly descending from above, they would immediately acclaim him as messiah for that's the way many people expected the messiah to arrive. It would be an easy way for Jesus to get a following, but it was not ease and popularity Jesus sought. His was to do the Father's will, which would involve fidelity to his mission of teaching, a mission that would gain him many enemies and a fidelity that would lead to his suffering and death.

Our forty days have just begun. Whatever prayer or sacrifice or good work we may have determined to do during this sacred time, I would bet that one temptation all of us will have (at least I always do) is to say to ourselves "40 days is too long." Don't give up whatever your good works might happen to be. Our works and prayers will be a source of blessings for each of us and for all of us. Amen.

Second Sunday of Lent

February 28, 2010

INTRODUCTION (Gen. 15,5-12.17-18; Phil, 3,20-4,1; Luke 9,28b-36)

Abram, whose name was later changed to Abraham, lived almost 4000 years ago. God had already inspired him to leave his home in southern Iraq (Ur of the Caldeans) and make a new home in the Land of Canaan. Today we hear God make two promises to Abram 1) he would have so many descendants they could not be counted and 2) someday his descendants would occupy the entire land of Canaan. As a proof that these promises would ever be fulfilled, God gave Abram a sign which consisted of a covenant ritual, a common practice in those days. This

ritual involved those who were making the covenant to cut an animal in half and then walking between the halves. It was a symbolic way of saying, "may the same thing happen to me as to this animal if I am unfaithful to my promise." God is often represented as light and/or fire in the Scriptures. In this experience only God, symbolized as fire and light, moved between the two halves of the animals. This indicated that God was not asking anything in return from Abram except for his trust, a trust that would be tested in many ways, but a trust that Abram always maintained. In the psalm that follows, we express our own trust in God as our light and our salvation."

HOMILY: I have four important topics I want to touch on today. (1) We'll begin with the gospel. The gospels try to get us to answer for ourselves a very important question. The question is the one Jesus asked his disciples at Caesarea Philippi: "Who do you say that I am?" We all know Peter's answer: "You are the Messiah." His answer is a partial answer to the question of who Jesus is, and Jesus complimented Peter for it. He also clearly told Peter that Peter still had so much more he needed to understand. Today's gospel gives us another piece of the answer. All three gospels closely connect the transfiguration of Jesus to Peter's profession of faith. They seldom pay much attention to issues of time, but they all make a point that it was about a week later that Jesus took Peter, James and John up a high mountain and the divine glory radiated from him. The voice from the cloud helps us further to answer the question, "Who do you say that I am?" God said: "This is my Son, my Chosen One. Listen to him." They say a picture is worth a thousand words, so I would like to show you four pictures: First is Mt. Tabor. The gospels do not tell us this is the place where the transfiguration took place, but it is the traditional site. It stands out all by itself in the middle of the plain of Jezreel. This next picture is a closer picture with the road going to the top. When I was in Israel several years ago, a bus took us only part way up, then a taxi had to finish taking us to the top because buses couldn't make those turns. I had the privilege of being the main presider at the Mass our group celebrated when we got to the church at the top. This third picture is a painting by Giovanni Bellini. It's not quite so dramatic as the one by Raphael. Raphael showed us what was going on at the base of the mountain while Jesus was being transfigured. The apostles were trying to cast a demon out of a young boy and they couldn't because their faith wasn't strong enough. They all had to wait until Jesus returned so he could cast it out. Our best lesson from the transfiguration is, I think, the words of God the Father: "This is my Beloved Son, my Chosen One; listen to him." He is worth listening to for he will bring us into eternal glory as St. Paul tells us.

(2) My second item today: I want to thank all of our parishioners and visitors for their great response to my October appeal for increased donations. Back in October when I made my appeal, we were about \$6000 in the red. Today we are about \$15,000 to the good. But I hasten to say: please don't ease up, because other sources of revenue such as bequests and special gifts are lagging behind and besides, in fiscal year 08-09 we lost \$59,000. It is important to say "thank you," so I am mentioning this so I can say "thank you very much."

(3) I want to let you know from me personally, and not second hand, that we are making some changes in the administration of our school. Sister Ann knows she has reached her limit and

she is no longer able to keep up as she has done so well in the past. I know that if I had to keep a schedule as she does, they would have buried me ten years ago. As I see it, she had three options: 1) to just hang on, wearing herself out and not being able to do as good a job as she needed to do, 2) to hand in her resignation and say goodbye and good luck, or 3) to continue working in a reduced capacity as co-principal. Sister would continue to be involved helping children with special needs, doing PR, development and giving input and help to a new principal. On top of this, the Mercy Sisters will be subsidizing Sr. Ann's salary. In other words, we're keeping her expertise and involvement in the school without any cost at all. To me that was a no-brainer. The idea was Sister Ann's idea and I am delighted that she will remain involved in the school. We chose Jason Fightmaster, who has been a teacher as well as our acting vice-principal for the past several years, to be co-principal with her. He will carry the burden of the day to day operation of the school. We will have to hire a teacher to take over his teaching position and we will have to pay him more as principal. This third option will cost us an extra \$20,000 next year, but I think it would be less expensive overall than either of the other two options.

Number four, the Catholic Ministry Appeal will begin this week and, of course, we need your help. This appeal is exclusively for six Archdiocesan ministries. Two-thirds of your donation will go toward the education of priests and ministers at the Athenaeum, Catholic Charities and Social Services, and retired diocesan priests. Thus Fr. Lammeier benefits from this collection and some day I hope to be able to. The other third will go for College Campus Ministries, chaplains for hospitals and prisons, and St. Rita's School for the Deaf. Nothing is used for Archdiocesan administration. All these worthwhile causes are related to ministries that would be beyond the capability of any single parish to maintain. We have gone over our goal every year for the past 18 years. So I am very hopeful that our parish can meet our goal of \$16,100, which is only \$300 more than last year. Whatever you can give will be greatly appreciated, even if it's \$10. Last year I suggested that if everyone who could pledge or donate \$100 did so, we would make our goal. I would make the same suggestion this year. You will receive a letter from Archbishop Schnurr this week with a pledge card and donation envelope. Please bring your pledge or donation with you next week and put it in the collection basket.

Those are all the items I want to talk about today. I hope perhaps you have a greater appreciation of Jesus' transfiguration. As we gather together with our Lord today, I hope you might feel as the apostles did: "Lord, it is good that we are here."