

## 19th Sunday in Ordinary Time- C Cycle

August 9, 2010

**INTRODUCTION** - (Wisdom 18,6-9; Hebrews 11,1-2.8-19; Luke 12,32-48)

Faith is our theme. Our second reading today has us reflect on the faith of Abraham and Sarah. Our brief first reading from the Book of Wisdom poetically expresses praise for the faith of God's people in Egypt. Following the directions Moses gave them, they prepared to leave Egypt behind and head out for the Promised Land. Our faith in Christ expresses itself in many ways. Today's gospel stresses living a good life and being ready for the Lord when he comes again.

**HOMILY:** A mother had a fidgety little boy with her in church. During the homily she leaned over and whispered something in his ear and he was good as gold the rest of the Mass. After Mass the priest asked her what she said. She said "If you don't behave, father will lose his place and he will have to start the sermon all over again." I'm sure no one gets fidgety when I preach.

One of the themes Jesus spent so much time and energy preaching about was the theme of the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven. A little historical background will help us understand why the concept of "kingdom" took on such major importance in the hearts and minds of God's people. From 1000 BC to 600 BC, the Jews had a king and a kingdom of their own. Actually it was not their own, but it was God's kingdom, where God was their provider, their protector and their ruler. The king ruled as God's representative. Unfortunately, many kings grossly ignored God's rules and did not lead the people in the ways of God. About 600 BC the Babylonians invaded, plundered, destroyed, enslaved and took control. The Persians (modern day Iran) controlled Israel after they conquered the Babylonians, then Alexander the Great (from Greece) conquered the Persians, and the Greeks controlled all the land from Greece and Egypt to India. The Jews successfully regained their autonomy shortly before the time of Jesus through the Maccabean revolt. Then in 63 BC, Pompey and the Romans conquered the Jews and they were in control for over 500 years. So, at the time of Jesus, Roman rulers governed the land and, with the backing of Roman soldiers, they kept order and made sure taxes were collected for Rome. Paying taxes to a foreign government for the privilege of living in the land God had given them was especially blasphemous to the Jews. This short history might help you understand the Jewish people's desire for freedom and independence at the time of Jesus. Many people believed that God would rescue them from their suffering and from the forces of evil that were in charge. God would punish their enemies and would initiate a utopian era to be enjoyed by God's faithful people. God's kingdom would bring freedom and an end to poverty, suffering, sickness, war and hostilities. John the Baptist proclaimed that he was sent to prepare people for the coming kingdom by calling them to conversion and to a baptism of repentance. His message was: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" (Mt. 3,2) His message was stern and brought many people back to God, and we know how he was beheaded by the tetrarch Herod Antipas for his efforts at reform. Jesus showed his support for John's message and mission by being baptized by John. When Jesus began his own ministry, he and his disciples (several of whom had been disciples of the Baptist) began by baptizing.

Like John, Jesus taught that those who were not part of God's kingdom would suffer, but Jesus emphasized even more the unimaginable joy the kingdom would bring to those who belonged to it. He was not afraid to teach people they must live good lives if they wish to belong to God's kingdom. Jesus pictured the kingdom of God in a variety of ways, especially through his parables, his miracles and through reaching out to sinners. If we really want to understand the gospels and to know Jesus' message, we need to understand this concept of the kingdom.

In today's gospel Jesus teaches us to be ready for the kingdom. The people of Jesus' day expected it soon. The earliest Christians expected it soon. Certain groups throughout the centuries have pinpointed the exact day and time it would take place. But Jesus told us clearly no one knows when it will be, so we must always be ready. We don't want to be left out.

Jesus uses two examples: a master who had servants (who most likely were slaves) went to a wedding celebration. Jesus used a wedding celebration as an example, because no one knew when it would end - sometimes not for days. It probably depended on how long the supply of wine lasted (and whether Jesus was there to make more). In that culture a master would never be a table waiter for his servants. What Jesus is telling us by this image is that those who are ready for the kingdom will be blessed beyond their wildest expectations. The second example of a thief also dwells on the idea of uncertainty. No one knows when a thief might come so we must always be prepared.

Almost everything Jesus said and did points to the kingdom. Thus so much more could be said about this central theme of the gospels. I hope maybe, with the few ideas I did offer, we understand a little better what we pray for when we pray: "Thy kingdom come."

## **Feast of the Assumption - Vigil Mass**

**August 14, 2010**

### **INTRODUCTION**

People often confuse the Ascension and the Assumption. The Ascension commemorates Jesus ascending into heaven and taking his place at the right hand of God. It is celebrated on the Seventh Sunday of Easter. The Assumption commemorates our belief that Mary, after her life on this earth had come to an end, was raised up to eternal life and was taken into heaven, body and soul. It was only fitting that she who was Jesus' mother and who was full of grace her entire life, should share first, before all others, in the risen glory of her Son. The dogma of the Assumption was declared by Pope Pius XII in 1950, but it had been believed and celebrated for centuries before that.

*Vigil Mass:* Our first reading (I Chronicles 15, 3-4,15-16; 16, 1-2) is about the Ark of the Covenant, the sacred gold-plated box that contained the Ten Commandments. The Ark was the unique symbol of God's presence with Israel. It was

constructed in the desert by Moses on the way to the Promised Land. When King David established his capital in Jerusalem about the year 1000 BC, he brought the Ark there. Today's reading describes this solemn and joyful occasion. In Christian symbolism, Mary is sometimes referred to as the Ark of the Covenant. Just as God was present in a special way wherever the Ark was taken, so God was present with Mary in a most special way when she carried within her womb the only Son of God, Jesus our Savior. The early Christians also saw Jerusalem as a symbol of heaven. That symbolism is reflected in today's first reading. The Ark being taken up to Jerusalem symbolizes Mary being taken body and soul into the heavenly kingdom.

Mass during the day: Our first reading is from the book of Revelation. The book of Revelation is highly symbolic. Some of the symbolism is quite obvious while it requires a fairly extensive knowledge of Scripture to interpret some of the other symbols. In today's first reading we hear about a woman, a child and a dragon. The dragon represents the devil and the powers of evil at work in the world. The child is Christ. The woman in our reading has a double symbolism. She stands for Mary, the physical mother of Jesus Christ, and she stands for the Church, our spiritual mother who brings Jesus Christ to birth in us through faith and the sacraments. In today's passage the woman is rescued from the powers of the dragon and is described in great glory. This too has a double symbolism. It symbolizes the glory of Mary in the assumption. It also symbolizes God's faithful people whom he will rescue from evil and will bring, in the resurrection from the dead, into the glory of heaven.

## **HOMILY**

Mary's assumption into heavenly glory is not explicitly described in the Scriptures. As St. John says at the end of his gospel, the Scriptures do not tell us everything that could be said about Jesus, what he said or did, much less does it tell us everything about Mary or the Apostles or the early Church. The Church has believed for centuries that Mary was so honored in the assumption because no one followed Christ as perfectly as she did, thus it is perfectly appropriate that Mary would follow him into eternal glory, body and soul.

A painting by Raphael (Vatican Pinacoteca: Crowning of the Virgin - Oddi Altarpice) recalls the legend that when Mary's life came to an end, the apostles buried her. Thomas, however, was not there at the time and when he returned he wanted to see for himself that she had died. When they opened her tomb, her body was gone. It had been raised and was taken to heaven by her Son who crowned her as queen. St. Francis de Sales said: "What son would not bring his mother back to life and would not bring her into paradise after her death if he could?" Actually, no one knows where Mary might have passed away - whether it was in Jerusalem or in Ephesus.

Another painting by Raphael (Vatican Pinacoteca: Madonna of Foligno) is one I thought was very lovely. It is part of a larger piece which includes St. John the Baptist and St. Francis on the left and St. Jerome introducing the kneeling Sigismondo Conti who was the patron who commissioned the painting.

*Homily ending at Vigil Mass:* We celebrate the honor and privilege given to Mary. Today, in Mary, we also celebrate our hope of final glorification when Christ will raise up to new life all those who have followed him faithfully. In the gospel a woman from the crowd called Mary blessed, but Jesus reminds us why she was truly blessed, in that she "heard God's word obeyed it."

*Homily ending at Mass during the day:* Mary praised God in her visit to Elizabeth: "The Almighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name." Today we celebrate the honor and privilege given to Mary, but today in Mary we also celebrate our hope of final glorification when Christ will raise up to new life all those who have followed him faithfully. As St. Paul tells us in his wonderful chapter on the resurrection: "For just as in Adam all die, so too in Christ shall all be brought to life but each one in proper order: Christ the firstfruits; then, at his coming, those who belong to Christ." No one belonged to Christ as perfectly as Mary did. Amen.

## **21st Sunday in Ordinary Time- C Cycle**

**August 22, 2010**

**INTRODUCTION:** Our first reading today (Is. 66, 18-21) comes from the time when the Jews were experiencing 50 years of exile and enslavement in Babylon. They had given up any hope of returning to their homeland in Judea and to the city where they worshipped their God, Jerusalem. The prophet we will now hear foresees great things for Jerusalem. He tells God's disheartened people they would once again worship in Jerusalem. Even more, some day people from foreign nations would come to worship with them. Even foreigners would be accepted as priests. God first chose the Jews as his chosen people, and it was through them that God expressed his desire that all people would be saved. Thus the Jews are our spiritual ancestors. A practical question comes up in today's gospel: how many really will be saved. Jesus reminds us sadly, many will not be. (Lk 13, 22-30).

**HOMILY:** A man remembered this event from his younger days. He relates how his mother was a cleaning fanatic. One Saturday she gave him and his older brother the chore to clean their rooms. She was none too happy about how messy they were. She even kept watch as they cleaned and kept telling them to do a better job. Finally, the older brother, exasperated with having to keep doing the same job over until it was perfect, reached for a broom and asked his mother: "Can I use this, or are you planning on going somewhere?" The narrator didn't describe what happened next.

Sometimes parents are over-strict and sometimes over-lenient. It's hard to be perfect for any of us. We have to learn as we go along. But whatever imperfections parents have, mostly they are loving people and are trying to do a good job. The reason they try so hard is because they want us to learn how to live right, how to avoid doing things that are wrong, how we can grow to be successful in this life. Believe it or not, that's what

God wants to teach us as well. Most of all he wants us to experience infinite happiness for all eternity. So our second reading today tells us "do not disdain the discipline of the Lord or lose heart when reproved by him." (Hebrews 12, 5-7.11-13) Sometimes people think that God gave us laws just to take the joy out of life. Keep holy the Lord's day, honor your parents, do not kill, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not bear false witness, etc. God gave us rules and holds us accountable - not because he wants to take away our happiness. As a loving parent God wants happiness for us forever. He even sent his Son to teach us further so we could be part of his eternal kingdom, a kingdom where pain and suffering and even death would be done away with and we would experience only peace and love and joy. Going to the gospel for today, Luke tells us Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem, the place where his teachings would lead to his being put to death, but also the place where he would, through his death, initiate God's kingdom. Seventeen times Luke reminds us, in the course of Jesus' journey, that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem because Jerusalem plays so much a role in Jesus' saving work.

On the way the question comes up: "Will only a few people be saved?" Jesus says clearly the kingdom is offered to all: people from all nations, the north and the south, the east and the west will be part of it. Jesus doesn't answer whether it will be few or many who will accept the offer; however, he does say many will not! This is one of those hard sayings of Jesus, one that many of us preachers want to soften or tiptoe around; to do that, however, would not be fair to the gospel or fair to those who came to hear it. Surveys tell us even many Catholics feel they can ignore many of the important things God wants of us, and yet they continue to feel assured they are going to be saved. That's directly contrary to the teachings of Jesus. Today Jesus tells us we must strive to enter through the narrow gate. The Greek word '?????????' (you can hear the word "agony" in this word) would be better translated "strain every nerve, take pains, exert yourself, to enter..." Jesus is telling us we can't take salvation for granted. Just having a loose connection with our Lord will not do anything for us: for he tells us some will say "we ate and drank in your company and you taught in our streets..." But as Jesus said, "So what, you didn't take what I said as the word of God and put it into practice. I don't know where you are from." Jesus tells us we have to exert ourselves to enter a narrow gate, a gate that people have to pass through one or two at a time. Perhaps Jesus means this image for those who believe that because they belong to a particular race, or a particular group or a particular religion, they feel that's a guarantee they have it made. We have to take Jesus seriously, and we have to understand there is an urgency about it. For eventually it will be too late and the door to the kingdom will be locked. Eventually we will run out of time. If we haven't done so already, we must make our decision now to be faithful to him.

Now if you go home and tell your friends I tried to scare the hell out of people today, you are right. You don't want to stand before the Lord and say no one warned us we should take our faith so seriously. And I don't want to have to stand before our Lord on the last day and have him say to me, "you didn't do a very good job of telling people what they should have been hearing from the pulpit." Amen.

## 22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time- C Cycle

August 29, 2010

(Sirach 3, 17-18.20.28-29; Heb 12, 18-19.22-24; Luke 14 1.7-14)

A college professor and an elderly farmer find themselves sitting next to one another on a long flight. The college professor thinks himself very bright and decides to have a little fun with the elderly farmer. He suggests they play a game. The farmer is tired and politely says he would rather not and sits back to catch a few winks. The college professor persists saying the game is a lot of fun. He said, "I ask you a question and if you can't answer it you pay me \$5. Then you ask me a question and if I can't answer it I'll pay you \$500." This gets the farmer's attention so he agrees to play. So the professor asks, "How far away is the moon?" The farmer doesn't say a word but reaches into his pocket and pulls out a \$5 bill and gives it to the professor. Then the professor says, "You ask me a question." So the farmer asked: "What goes up a hill with three legs and comes down with four?" The professor was challenged. He looked up references on his laptop, called a couple of his smart colleagues and after half an hour he gave up in frustration. Meantime the farmer was taking a little nap. The professor woke him and handed him \$500. The farmer put it in his pocket and went back to sleep. The professor is going crazy not knowing the answer so he wakes the farmer up and asks: "Well, so what goes up a hill with three legs and comes down with four?" The farmer reached into his pocket, handed the professor \$5 and went back to sleep.

Don't we all just love to see a person who thinks they are so superior be brought down to earth? Jesus tells a parable appropriate to his culture; such things as where people sat at a dinner table were carefully figured out depending on a person's age, public position, learning, attainments, wealth, etc. All of these conferred on a person the right to be seated in prominent places. Jesus made his parable about a wedding banquet which was even more formal than an ordinary meal. The point of the parable comes at the end. Jesus is not trying to teach good manners nor to teach people how to avoid embarrassment at an event. He is teaching what is important in order to enter the kingdom of God: "everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." When we're full of pride, we're full of ourselves and there's no place for God in our hearts. Remember, pride was the first sin. The devil told Eve if you eat of the forbidden fruit "You will not die. God knows that your eyes will be opened when you eat it. You will become just like God, knowing everything, both good and evil." (Gen 3, 4-5) Adam and Eve thought the forbidden fruit would make them equal to their Creator. Those who will enjoy God's kingdom will not only be greatly blessed, but they will know how to be lovingly subjected to the one who is their King in the kingdom: God. Long ago, the prophet Micah preached: "You have been told what is good, and what the Lord requires of you: only to do the right and to love goodness and to walk humbly with your God." (Micah 7, 8) That's a good summary of what God wants of us. We see humility as singled out specifically as if it opens the door to every other virtue and to an honest relationship with God. Jesus gave us his own example to imitate when he said: "Learn from me for I am meek and humble of heart." (Mt. 11, 29)

I want to remind you there are two kinds of pride and two kinds of humility. The first kind of pride is healthy pride, where we are honest about the gifts God has given us, perhaps good health, perhaps a good mind, perhaps many good influences as we grew up, perhaps a good education. We acknowledge these as coming from God and are grateful. St. Paul asks, "What do you possess that you have not received? And if you have received it why are you boasting as if you did not receive it?" (I Cor. 4, 7) Healthy pride enables us to take care of ourselves, to try to dress appropriately, to develop and use our talents, to share with those less fortunate (as the second part of today's gospel tells us to do) and to recognize where all our blessings come from. Unhealthy pride (sometimes called neurotic pride) tries to convince us that we are perfect or at least much more superior in various ways than we really are. Unhealthy pride convinces us we don't need to give God much attention because we're quite capable of taking care of ourselves. It causes us to look down on others who are not quite as brilliant or talented or attractive or wealthy as we ourselves. This kind of pride can also backfire and turn itself on us. It can really bring us down when we don't live up to our exalted expectation of ourselves. The two kinds of humility correspond to these two types of pride. There is true humility where we honestly recognize our dependence on God and with honesty we know ourselves: our strengths and abilities, our weaknesses and limitations. False humility where we act humbly but like the people in today's gospel, we're waiting for someone to come along and say: "move up higher friend."

As you come to Mass today, you are showing you recognize who your Lord is, you are acknowledging he is Lord by giving God adoration and thanks and by recognizing your need for his help. Amen.