

## 23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time- C Cycle

September 5, 2010

**INTRODUCTION:** (Philemon: 9-10,12-17) To understand our second reading, I need to explain something about slavery in the Roman Empire in the first century. It was in many ways different than our experience of slavery before the Civil War. Slavery was common in the first century but slaves came from nations and peoples that Rome had conquered. Most slaves were probably white, many would have been educated and would have worked as musicians, scribes, craftsmen, teachers and even doctors. A slave might eventually be set free by his or her owner or buy their own way to freedom. Today's second reading is about a slave named Onesimus (a name which means "useful"). Onesimus escaped from his owner. The Greek word for an owner of slaves is "despota." Can you see an English word in that? Anyway, the owner was named Philemon (a name which means "loving"). By Roman law, a runaway slave could be punished by death. Onesimus had known Paul for Paul converted his master, Philemon, to Christ. So, in fear for his life, Onesimus ran to Paul, who was in prison at the time. Unlike today, where prisoners receive good care, the Romans locked a person up temporarily until a trial was held. It helps to know that in those days a prison was just a place where an accused person was held until their case was determined: whether they would be executed, sent into exile, have their property confiscated, or be set free. The Romans never considered it a punishment to lock up a criminal. Often prisoners needed friends or family to provide for their basic needs and, apparently, Onesimus did that for Paul. For Paul Onesimus lived up to his name: useful. In the process Paul converted him to Christ. Paul thus refers to Onesimus as his own child for he has led him to rebirth in Christ. Paul would have liked to keep Onesimus with him to help him, but he felt an obligation to send him back to Philemon. He didn't feel right benefiting from a gift that had not been given to him. Paul asked Philemon in the letter we hear in today's second reading to receive Onesimus back, not as property he might own, but as a brother in the Lord. Christianity transcends all of our relationships.

**HOMILY:** (Luke 14, 25-33) On this holiday weekend, a few comments about work would be appropriate: Success in life according to Arnold Schwarzenegger is: "Work hard, stay focused and marry a Kennedy." Dave Barry quips: "When I hear about people making vast fortunes without doing any productive work or contributing anything to society, my reaction is, How do I get in or that?" An office supervisor had to speak to a new employee about her tardiness, that it was almost daily and was causing the other employees to complain. After a few moments, the new employee agreed it was a problem and asked: "Is there another door I could use?"

Now to today's gospel. Again Luke tells us Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. Here he tells us Jesus was traveling with great crowds. Jesus' disciples and those others with him were anticipating major change in their world when Jesus would arrive in Jerusalem. They anticipated Jesus would free them from their Roman oppressors, and after 600 years of being subjects of some foreign king, their land would be their own and they would have their own king. Jesus, of course, would be their king and with his miraculous powers he would make life wonderful for them.

Jesus alone knew what was about to happen. So he told them, as he always spoke the truth, you can't follow me unless you take up your cross and follow me. (He would have made a poor politician.) Furthermore, unless you hate your father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters and even your own life you cannot be my disciple. "Hate!" That's a strong word. Actually the word used in Greek "miseo" does have a secondary meaning of "disregarding rather than giving preferential treatment." The first rule about understanding Scripture is to see a statement in its context. The context here is the entire New Testament where love of others, especially those to whom we owe the most love, is of supreme importance. St Matthew also gave us this saying of Jesus in his gospel, but he words it this way: "Whoever loves his father or mother, brother or sister, more than me is not worthy of me." Most likely Matthew is an interpretation of what Jesus said and Luke's version (unless you "hate" your father and mother, etc...) is closer to the original statement of Jesus. I wonder if Jesus used such a strong word in order to shock us into realizing what he is asking of us. A quote from St. Gregory the Great, whose feast we just celebrated, is relevant to this saying of Jesus: "Perhaps it is not after all so difficult for a person to part with his possessions, but it is certainly most difficult for him to part with himself. To renounce what one has is a minor thing; but to renounce what one is, that is asking a lot." Jesus asks a lot. Why does he ask so much? It's all because that is the nature of love. Joy comes when two beings truly give themselves to one another (and are not merely using one another). God created us for joy - eternal joy. And God has given himself to us fully in the gift of his Son. He continues to give himself - especially in the Eucharist. He wants us to give ourselves fully to him so we can be fully happy.

Remember Jesus told us earlier in the gospel not to worry about what we are to eat and what we are to wear. God takes care of the birds of the air and the lilies in the field. Certainly he will take care of us. (Lk 12, 22- 34) Here he gives us two little examples of how we must calculate the cost of following him, just as a builder has to figure whether he can do the job before he begins to build or a king has to figure whether he can win a war before he gets into battle. I think the Lord would expect us to be prudent in planning ahead for any important element of our lives. After all, prudence is a virtue, and God expects us to use the brains he gave us. The Lord wants us to be wise in planning ahead for our eternal salvation. The way to arrive there safely is to follow him, for as he tells us in John's gospel, he is the way and the truth and the life. (Jn. 14, 6) In other words we know we're not going to be in this world forever and we can't wait to start preparing for happiness with God until the angel of death stamps on our forehead: "Return to sender" and then sends us on our way.

We come to Mass today seeking to grow in our relationship with Christ who is the way, for this task of following him and putting him above everything else in our lives is an on-going process and with his guidance and with his help we will succeed. Heaven is the happiness of surrendering ourselves to the greatest love in the universe. Amen.

## 24th Sunday in Ordinary Time- C Cycle

September 12, 2010

**INTRODUCTION:** God's forgiveness is today's theme. Our first reading (Exodus 32,7-11.13-14) takes us back to Moses, about 1300 years before Christ. The people of Israel had just escaped from Egypt and were going through the desert of Sinai on their way to the Promised Land. God had already made a covenant with them at Mt. Sinai, choosing them as his special people and demanding in return that they honor him as their only God. When God called Moses back to the top of Mt. Sinai to speak with him again, the people got into trouble. They fashioned for themselves a golden calf and worshipped it as their God. This is where our first reading begins. God is angry with his people. Notice, in speaking to Moses, he calls them "your people." Moses intercedes for the people and "convinces" God to be forgiving. His prayer displays total unselfishness. God, of course, forgives them. In the second reading we hear St. Paul describe what a sinful person he once was and how God was merciful to him (1 Tim, 1,12-17). In today's gospel, which is the entire fifteenth chapter of St. Luke, we hear three beautiful parables on God's forgiveness (Lk. 15,1-32).

**HOMILY:** A teacher in the local high school was pulled over by the police just a few minutes after she left the school parking lot for having expired license plates. The officer asked to see her license and car registration. Students leaving around the same time began driving past, honking their horns, hooting, or admonishing their teacher. Finally, the officer asked if she was a teacher at the school. She admitted she was. "I think you've paid your debt to society," the officer concluded with a smile and left without giving her a ticket. Although the police have to do their job, if we're the one who got caught, we're grateful when we're shown mercy.

What if Jesus gave us a ticket every time we did something wrong, Boy! I would hate to pay all those fines! Jesus is not interested in catching us but in saving us. St. Paul tells us today, "You can depend on this as worthy of full acceptance: that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners."

St. Luke tells us today that Jesus was harshly criticized by the authorities for associating with sinners and even for eating with them. He responded by telling three stories. All three emphasize that God cares about each one of us and doesn't want any of us to be lost. Sometimes we get lost because we thoughtlessly wander off in the wrong direction, moving further and further away from our shepherd. Little by little, like a lamb looking for juicy clumps of grass, we suddenly wonder how we got lost. Sometimes we choose to get lost like in the story of the prodigal son. God is not going to find us if we do not want to be found. I think one of the main points in the story of the prodigal son (I think we could also call him the narcissistic son) is that he had to "come to his senses" and turn back to his father before he could discover his father's love and that his father was waiting for him all along. God gives us freedom to walk away from him, and it's in freedom that we must choose to return. Once we decide to do that, he's there waiting for us ready to forgive.

Why does God give us so much freedom? It's because love can only exist in an environment of freedom. If God forced us to love him, that would be a contradiction in terms for we would be robots - incapable of making the choice to love.

A person might say "that's all well and good, but our religion tells us we will be eternally punished if we choose not to love God or follow him." Indeed, there will be punishment, but not one God imposes on us. It is one that results from turning our back on the one thing that can fulfill us: God's offer of fantastic and everlasting love. The father in the parable didn't have to punish his wayward son. The son brought all his misery on himself, because he walked away from what could really bring him happiness and looked for happiness everywhere else.

That's why God is so ready to forgive. He wants happiness for us and he knows when we open our heart to him, that alone will bring us the happiness for which we were created.

Notice the element of joy in all three parables. God is full of joy when the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son are found. God is joyful in our experiencing love and union with him, which alone will bring us our greatest joy now and for all eternity. Amen.

## **25th Sunday in Ordinary Time- C Cycle**

**September 19, 2010**

**INTRODUCTION** (Amos 8, 4-7; I Timothy 2, 1-8; Luke 16, 1-13) Seven hundred fifty years Before Christ, Israel was enjoying a time of great financial and material prosperity. But spiritually they were bankrupt. In their prosperity they lost their focus on God. The Sabbath and the new moon were days of both prayer and rest. The Israelites resented this interruption in what they considered most important in life - making money. The ephah and shekel, mentioned in our first reading, were weights used in buying and selling. They didn't use honest weights, thereby cheating both their suppliers and their customers. They even exploited their customers by mixing useless materials in with the products they wanted to sell - such as mixing chaff with the wheat. The world has changed considerably since then, but in many ways human nature seems to remain the same.

**HOMILY** Late one night, a robber wearing a ski mask jumped into the path of a well-dressed man, stuck a gun in his side and demanded "Give me your money." Indignant, the affluent looking man said, "You can't do this. I'm a United States Congressman!" "In that case," replied the robber, "give me my money."

That's what the rich man in today's gospel wanted: his money. He had heard that his employee was taking advantage of him. Whether the employee was stealing from the rich man or not isn't the main point, although he probably was. And whether the employee reducing the debt that various business people owed his master was honest or dishonest is not the point of the parable

either. The main point is that the employee was clever and wasted no time in planning for a secure future for himself.

Jesus tells us we need to be just as clever in planning for a secure future for ourselves, and it's not just for the few years we spend on this earth that we have to provide, but also for our time in eternity. Jesus is constantly reminding us that material things can make us feel so secure in this life that we forget about what is most important, our eternal life. That was the point of today's first reading from Amos. The prosperous era that the Israelites were enjoying 750 years before Christ led them to forget about the God who had blessed them so richly. When they lost touch with God, this led to the moral decline of the nation and its eventual collapse. Our life in this world is temporary. Eternity is forever. Jesus is telling us today to use the blessings God has given us to help us get closer to God and not let our possessions become a god in themselves.

## **26th Sunday in Ordinary Time- C Cycle**

**September 26, 2010**

**INTRODUCTION:** Today again we listen to the prophet Amos. (Amos 6, 1a.4-7) His words are directed to the Judeans, those living the southern kingdom of Israel. He addresses them as "the complacent in Zion." (Zion is another name for Jerusalem). Perhaps this warning came after the Assyrians destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel which, in today's reading, is called "Joseph." (Joseph is the name of the patriarch who was sold into slavery by his brothers and ended up being next to the pharaoh in power in Egypt. Many of his descendents had settled in the northern portion of Israel which the Assyrians destroyed.) The complacent in Jerusalem were living pampered, comfortable lives, paying no attention to the devastation of the north and not concerned that their own country was headed toward the same fate because of their social and moral depravity. Amos' words proved to be true.

**HOMILY:** The phone rang at the church office. The pastor answered: "St. Cyprian!" The caller asked: "Is this the pastor?" "Yes, it is." "This is the Internal Revenue Service. We wonder if you can help us." "I'll try." "Do you know Harold Schwartz?" "I do." "Is he a member of your congregation." "He is." "Did he donate \$10,000." "He will." (from *Laughter, the Best Medicine*, Reader's Digest, pg 293)

A lot of people say "money is the root of all evil" thinking they are quoting the Bible. But what the Bible actually says in I Tim 6, 10: "the love of money is the root of all evil." Jesus never condemned the wealthy for having wealth. He condemned them for letting their wealth make them forget about the God who had blessed them so generously - like the farmer we heard about several weeks ago. He had such a great harvest that he had to tear down his barns to build bigger ones and he gave no thought to the afterlife. Or Jesus condemned the wealthy for letting their wealth lead them into dishonesty like the unjust steward we heard about last week. Or Jesus condemned the wealthy because they let their wealth turn them into selfish, self-

centered persons like the rich man in today's gospel.

Today's parable would have been quite a shock for those who heard it. For in Jewish mentality, if a person was wealthy they were assumed to be good people whom God favored. If a person were poor or sick or infirmed, they were assumed to be sinners whom God was punishing for something. But things didn't work out that way for the rich man and Lazarus. It is an example of the kingdom of God that Jesus preached. Those who wish to be part of God's kingdom must love God and others. Love is the supreme law and love is not just a warm fuzzy feeling but is a willingness to even make sacrifices for others. Some people Jesus asked to give everything away and come follow him. He didn't ask that of everyone, but he did ask everyone to love God with our whole selves and to love our neighbor as we love ourselves.

What should the rich man have done? Jesus doesn't give us a specific answer. Perhaps he wants us to ask ourselves what we might have done if we were in his place. He does give us a general answer in the second part of the parable. The rich man wanted Lazarus to visit his brothers and warn them about how they should be living. Jesus said they have Moses and the prophets, that is, they have the Scriptures to guide them. If they don't pay attention to the Scriptures, they probably won't be impressed by someone who rises from the dead.

In Jesus' day, people didn't know what was going happening on the other side of the world. With the internet we know the instant an earthquake or a tsunami kills hundreds and thousands of people and leaves other thousands homeless. Knowing all this can give us guilty feelings, thinking we should help everyone - which we can't; or at least I know I can't. I try to help people in need, according to what my time and resources allow, according to their need and according to the responsibility I may have toward them. (Charity does begin at home, but it doesn't stay there.) Although I can't help everyone, I can help some, and if we all tried to do what we could, perhaps we would be a lot more peaceful with ourselves, and the world would be a lot more loving. We come to the Eucharist today to remember where our blessings come from and to offer thanks, and we ask God's help for the days ahead when we might be in need. Amen.