

All Saints - B Cycle

November 1, 2011

INTRODUCTION: Rev. 7,2-4.9-14; I John 3,1-3; Mt. 5,1-12a

Our first reading is from the book of Revelation. The section just preceding today's passage describes the end of the world. The sun will become dark and the moon will become red as blood and there will be a great earthquake all over the earth. People will try to hide from all these terrible things and they will ask: "Who can survive?" Today's reading is the answer to that question - those will survive who have followed Christ faithfully. The number 144,000 is a symbolic number; some scholars interpret this number to stand for the Jewish followers of Christ. The more important thing for us to notice is the reference to such a large crowd of those who are saved that no one can count them. Hopefully, we will be among them.

HOMILY: What do you think of when you read the Book of Revelation (a.k.a. the Apocalypse)? I would bet most people think of all the book describes: beasts and monsters and dragons, the great and terrifying natural calamities like the sea and rivers turning to blood, earthquakes and great hailstones and nations falling, and Armageddon.

Will we see any of these calamities in our time? We do not know. We know from geology that in the past four and a half billion years planet earth has endured many natural calamities. In this day and age, we humans are technologically capable of inflicting on ourselves almost all of the catastrophes talked about in Revelations. The important thing to remember about the Book of Revelation are the positive things: the salvation that Christ brings us, the new heavens and the new earth when every tear will be wiped away and death shall be no more, and neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain. This is the new world that God is creating that we will share in and enjoy if we follow Christ faithfully.

Although we identify certain people as "Saint" which means "holy," St. Peter, St. Francis, St. Agnes, St. Mary Magdalene, St. Joseph, etc., our feast today tells us there are many more holy people who have lived before us. I think of my parents and grandparents and many people I have known as a priest who have lived their lives faithful to Christ.

The Book of Revelation was written to help the early Christians (and Christians of every age) who were suffering for their faith, to ensure them that their sufferings will lead to life and joy that will be beyond all their expectations. The feast of All Saints we celebrate today is telling us the same thing. Do not let suffering or misfortune discourage you in your faith in Christ, believe in him, pray to him, obey his teachings. Jesus himself taught us an apocalyptic message. He came to teach us that God's good kingdom will triumph over the kingdom of this world. If we follow Christ and live for his kingdom, we shall be like him and enjoy his presence and the presence of all God's holy ones in the heavenly kingdom. Amen.

Ordinary - A Cycle

November 6, 2011

INTRODUCTION: (Wisdom 6,12-16; Matthew 25, 1-13) Greece has fallen on bad times lately, but centuries ago, it was the center of culture and civilization. Alexander the Great, who was born in 357 BC, had conquered the entire Middle East by the time of his death at age 34: from Greece and Egypt all the way to India. (It took him 13 years) Under his generals, the Greek language and Greek culture supplanted the local culture. This is the situation at the time the Book of Wisdom was written. Wisdom literature in the Middle East is very ancient, going back almost 1000 years before Christ. The wisdom literature of the various nations expressed practical insights about manners, morality and the mysteries of life. Jewish wisdom writings took many of these insights and combined them with the wisdom in God's law. With wisdom from the Scriptures, Jewish wisdom offered a more profound view of life and how to live it. Our first reading from the Book of Wisdom was written perhaps about 50 years before Christ, probably in Alexandria in Egypt. It was written in the language of those times, Greek. Since it was not composed in Hebrew, you will not find it in the Protestant Bible. The Catholic Church, however, accepts it as inspired. Our first reading tells us wisdom is available for anyone who diligently seeks it with honesty and openness. But those who find the search for wisdom too much trouble will be deprived of it. A theme we hear again in the gospel.

HOMILY: I hate to tell an old joke but this one fits today's gospel. Fr. Murphy paid a visit to one of his elderly parishioners whom he hadn't seen at church for a few months. In a nice way, he tried to tell her she should be coming to church. "You know," he said, "you are not getting any younger and you should start thinking more of the hereafter." "Well, Father," she said, "I think of the hereafter all the time." I go into the kitchen and I say to myself, what am I here after. And I go into the bedroom and I ask myself, what am I here after. And it's goes on like that all day."

In the next few weeks Jesus will be trying to get us to think more about the hereafter. The year is coming to an end (a new Church year begins in three weeks) and our life in this world will come to an end too. We're not going to dwell in this world forever. God has other plans for us and he wants us to be in on them. Several times this year, I have mentioned that Jesus' message is an apocalyptic message. He has come to reveal to us the Kingdom of God and he wants us to be part of that Kingdom. It is a kingdom where God will be in charge, a kingdom which Jesus has used many images to describe. Today the kingdom is compared to a wedding party. Weddings in the Middle East might be celebrated for several days. The celebration began with dancing and entertainment as the guests awaited the arrival of the groom. Punctuality was not an important element of their culture. Perhaps the groom was having his own party with his friends. Usually, however, the groom was busy haggling with the parents of the bride over the gifts he was expected to give to the relatives of the bride. Late night weddings were common. As Jesus tells the story, the bride is not mentioned, nor are we told where the guests had gathered, nor where everyone would process to in the middle of the night with their torches for the wedding and for more celebration. All these unanswered questions are not relevant to the main point of the story. The story is not about the details of the wedding, it is about the Kingdom

of God and the virgins represent the Church. The wise virgins anticipated a delay and were prepared. It should be added also that the parable is not about sharing, the oil represents something unable to be shared, something entirely personal. The parable is about being prepared for the sudden arrival of the groom (in the lesson of Jesus, the unknown time when the groom will arrive represents the suddenness when Christ will come and call us into his kingdom). The closed door represents that if we are not prepared, it will be too late for us. We will miss the celebration of eternal life God has invited us to.

In my meditation on this gospel, it struck me what a terrible feeling it is to be unprepared. Whenever I'm under a lot of stress, I always dream of being in a situation where I'm unprepared. I dream I'm back in school and there is a test coming up and I didn't study for it. Or I dream I'm getting up to read the gospel or to preach and I can't find the gospel in the book or I can't find my homily notes. I keep looking around as people start leaving. And pretty soon, there's no one left in church and I'm still looking. In our busy lives, we have to constantly remember what is most important, and being prepared to meet our God is the most important. That is the whole purpose of our having been created, to be with God forever.

Whether it is the devil or our own tendency to procrastinate, but something keeps telling us we have plenty of time to prepare. We think we have too many other things to worry about right now. This is definitely a lack of wisdom with regard to something as important as our eternal salvation. Or another thing we keep hearing, especially in today's culture, is that everyone is getting into heaven anyway, no matter how we've lived or what we've done. That's not the message Jesus gives us. He tells us over and over again in many ways: "You know neither the day nor the hour," so the moral is be wise and be prepared. Amen.

33rd Ordinary - A Cycle

November 13, 2011

In two weeks we are celebrating the beginning of a new Church year with the first Sunday of Advent. We begin again to tell the story of Jesus, his birth, his ministry of teaching, healing, forgiving and exorcisms, his saving death, resurrection, ascension and his sending the Holy Spirit upon us. We will also begin to use a new translation for the prayers in the Roman Missal at Mass. This is what I want to talk about today.

When I said my first Mass in May, 1964, it was a traditional Latin Mass. Even the Scripture readings were first read in Latin and then they were repeated in English before the sermon. In Advent that same year, we began to say some of the parts of the Mass in English. For me that was refreshing and exciting. I had studied Latin for seven and a half years and I sat through two years of a course in St. Thomas Aquinas' Summa when the teacher taught in Latin and the tests were essay tests in Latin. Even with that background, I found myself more often translating the prayers of the Mass and of the Divine Office rather than really praying them. Gradually more

and more of the Mass was prayed in our own language. The first official translation of the entire Mass into English came out in 1974. A second edition came out in 1985. It is that translation we have been using for the past 25 or 26 years. Pope John Paul and the International Congregation for English in the Liturgy felt that this 1985 translation was missing some of the dignity, beauty, doctrinal precision, nuances and poetic expressions of the Latin prayers, so a new translation was ordered. Our style of prayer for the past two dozen years expressed a certain familiarity with God; however, not to the extent of walking up to greet God and saying, "Hi, God, how are ya'?" Yet our prayer is almost conversational and comfortable. The Church wants our prayers to reflect to a greater degree how awesome God is. For example, we will usually say "O God" rather than simply "God" when we address God; or another example we will frequently hear in our prayers "we humbly beseech you" rather than simply telling God what we expect God to do for us. The new text also tries to render accurately words and phrases that we find in the Scriptures. I think these are all good things. One other good thing about the new translation is, because it is new, we will hear and pray the prayers with greater attention, at least for a while.

One of the speakers we had on the new translation gave us the example of Lincoln's Gettysburg address, which many of us memorized in grade school: "Four score and seven years ago?" It is a speech that is literary and even poetic. The same things could have been said in a more mundane way. Lincoln could have said: "Eighty seven years ago our ancestors started this country because they wanted to be free and because they believed we're all equal. Now our Country has been in a big fight over these principals, etc. etc." The point I am trying to make is the same thing can be said in different ways. Our new translation purports to be a more beautiful, dignified, humble, nuanced expression of the original Latin prayers.

We will have a prayer card in the pews in two weeks. You will be able to easily follow the prayers and all the changes are printed in bold print. I'm not going to comment on all the changes right now. After we get familiar with the new wording, I will offer a more detailed explanation. Right now I just want to point out a couple of things that will immediately strike you. This will probably be the hardest thing to get used to at first: when the priest says "The Lord be with you." You answer "And with your spirit." For those of you who remember when the Mass was in Latin, this was the response: "Et cum spiritu tuo." This response reflects the language St. Paul uses at the end of four of his letters. Before the gospel, when the priest or deacon announces, "A reading from the holy gospel according to Mark," you answer, "Glory to you O Lord." (That is the O inserted before Lord that I mentioned earlier).

There are other changes you will notice. If you want to read more about it, there is an insert in today's bulletin with a good explanation of most of the changes in detail. If you still want to read more, there are a few booklets on the radiators. They do a very good job explaining the new translation.

Some people love change; some people hate it. It will be that way with this until we all grow comfortable with it. A year from now, it will all come automatically. I like it that the wording is more scriptural; that the attitude behind the prayers expresses the greatness of God and how

privileged we are to enter into God's presence. Stay tuned for more information in a month or two. Amen.

Christ the King - A Cycle

Nov. 20, 2011

INTRODUCTION: (Ezekiel 34, 11-12. 15-17; I Cor. 15, 20-26.28; Matthew 25, 31-46) Today we honor Christ as our King. Our scripture readings do not picture him as a typical king. In our first reading, Ezekiel, the prophet, pictures God as a shepherd. God is distressed with the shepherds of his people; i.e., the kings and religious leaders. They led God's people away from God and to eventual disaster when the Babylonians invaded. God said he himself would lead them rightly. We see this prophecy perfectly fulfilled in Jesus. In our second reading, the whole chapter from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, from which our reading is taken is on the topic of the resurrection. Paul tells us the risen Jesus will reign until evil in every form has been destroyed. Then Jesus will turn the kingdom over to the Father. In the gospel Jesus is pictured as a judge, a judge who judges us on how we behave toward the lowly and the poor. Thus we have three images of Christ the King: a shepherd, the risen Lord and the judge of all nations.

HOMILY: Before Mass we projected on our screen the central part of Michelangelo's famous painting of the Last Judgment in the Sistine Chapel. The painting was based on today's gospel of Jesus judging the nations. This is one of the most powerful and one of the most memorable of Jesus' parables. The image of Jesus saying, "Depart from me you accursed?" is a picture of Jesus we would prefer not to think of (unless he is saying it to someone we greatly dislike). When we think of Jesus in relation to ourselves, we would rather picture him as kind, loving and forgiving. As judge he administers both forgiveness and justice. Today's parable repeats a theme that is found in many other parables, parables that tell us this is a time to come to him for forgiveness and mercy. Then there will come a time when it will be too late: a time when God will ask us to give an accounting of ourselves. We see this theme in the parable of the talents, the parable of the five wise and five foolish virgins, the parable of the workers in the vineyard, the parable of the great wedding feast where those invited offered lame excuses for why they could not come, as well as the part about the guest without the wedding garment, the parable of the unforgiving steward, the parable of the unjust steward and the parable about the rich man and Lazarus, just to mention a few that immediately come to mind.

If it disturbs us to think of Jesus as a judge who can condemn as well as forgive, than we can remember what Jesus said in John's gospel: "I came not to condemn the world but to save the world." (Jn. 12,47). He goes on to say, "the one who rejects me and does not receive my word has something to judge him; on the last day the word that I have spoken will serve as judge." (Jn. 12,48). In other words, the way we live will catch up with us. There is karma in the universe. The good we have done, the good we haven't done and the evil we have done will judge us; Jesus will not have to. There is no getting around that. Now is the time for forgiveness. Now is

the time to start over, (in the language of the gospel, the time for conversion). We've seen many TV shows of judges sitting in a courtroom handing out reward or punishment. I believe that in the final analysis, when the time comes for us to stand before Jesus, he will not be like a judge sitting in a courtroom. It will be the love that is in us, the love for God and the love for others that will determine whether our eternity will be an eternity of peace and joy or an eternity full of regret for having thrown away the opportunities God gave us to know him and love him and love others.

The truth Jesus teaches in today's parable is reflected in the real life experience of the conversion of St. Paul. When Paul, before his conversion, was persecuting the Christians and was on his way to Damascus to arrest Christians and bring them back to Jerusalem for trial, Jesus appeared to him in a blinding light. Paul asked, "Who are you, Lord?" Jesus answered, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." What Paul was doing to Jesus' followers, he was doing to Jesus. A powerful image! It is this concept that inspired many saints to dedicate themselves to minister to the poor and suffering such as Mother Theresa, St. Martin de Porres, Damian the leper, St. Vincent de Paul, St. Francis Xavier Cabrini, St. Katherine Drexel, St. Peter Claver, and many others

What you do to the least of my brothers and sisters you do to me. This does not imply that we can ignore our obligation to worship, praise and thank God. It is, after all, the first and greatest commandment to love God above all things. Today we are reminded how important the second commandment is, which is like the first: to love our neighbor as ourselves. Loving God, loving Jesus inspires us to love our neighbor for when we love another, relative, friend, associate, even someone who dislikes us or whom we dislike, especially if they are truly needy, we are loving Jesus. Amen.

1st Sunday of Advent - B Cycle

November 27, 2011

INTRODUCTION: (Isaiah 63, 16b-17. 19b; 64, 2-7) In all the events of our daily lives, a true prophet has the ability to see God more profoundly than anyone else can. In our first reading taken from Isaiah, the prophet recognized that when the Babylonians invaded and destroyed Israel, it was a disaster that God's people brought upon themselves for having ignored the direction God had tried to give them. When they returned home after 50 years of captivity, the job of rebuilding what they had lost was enormous. The prophet laments how God's people are now suffering and, in the name of God's wayward people, the prophet prays for their heavenly Father to forgive them and help them. It is an extremely beautiful prayer.

HOMILY: (Mark 13, 33-37) Today begins a new Church Year - designated as Cycle B. I might point out that our gospel today was written by St. Mark. Most of our gospels in Church Year Cycle A came from St. Matthew. Now this year we'll hear mostly from St. Mark. For many

people that may not seem significant, but each gospel has its own unique features. Mark is the oldest gospel, written most probably in Rome sometime between the years 64-67. Tradition describes Mark as the interpreter of Peter. That is, he wrote down whatever he remembered of Peter's proclamation of the good news (that's what gospel means) about Jesus Christ. Matthew and Luke, who wrote for their own faith communities, borrowed heavily from Mark and included additional materials of their own. Today's gospel passage comes from Jesus' final days in Jerusalem. Mark is encouraging his community of believers to be strong in the face of persecution and to resist the temptations of the pagan world they lived in. He tells them Jesus is going to come again. Evil will be destroyed and those who have remained faithful will be rewarded with eternal life. Thus, when Jesus comes he will expect his followers to be living according to his teachings. If we remain aware that he might return at any time, perhaps when we least expect him, then we will be watchful. It is a message Mark is giving us as we begin the season of Advent. All that Jesus had to say to the people of his day, all that Mark wrote for his faith community, is a message that holds just as true for us today for it is more than human words. It is God's inspired Word.

Once there was a man who had a store and in order to protect his store he bought a big watchdog. His watchdog loved to curl up right across the doorway of the store to keep watch over the store. Unlike many watchdogs who are alerted at the slightest noise, this dog often fell asleep and kept sleeping even as people stepped over him to enter the store. Outside the store was a big sign: "Beware of dog." Visitors to the town would often ask why they had to beware of that dog sleeping in the doorway. The owner said, "well, before I put up the sign, people kept tripping over him." (taken from Preaching Resources, Nov. 27, 2011, pg 3) Not a good example of being watchful. A better example would be families who had a loved one serving in Iraq or Afghanistan for many months and who are now waiting for their loved one to come home in the near future. You can imagine their excitement and anticipation. Or perhaps you can think of the excitement and anticipation of a child who is waiting for Santa Claus, not knowing exactly when he might arrive.

We will soon celebrate Jesus' coming to us as an infant, but that was only the beginning of God's coming to us. Jesus continues to come through prayer, through charity toward others, through sacraments and Scripture and at the time of our death. Finally, he will come in glory at the end of the world. Advent is more than just to prepare us to celebrate Jesus' birth, it is a time for renewed awareness of God in our lives now and a time to be sure we are ready to meet him when he comes to take us into his eternal kingdom.

There are dozens of things a person might do to prepare themselves better spiritually. I will leave you with one suggestion: read the gospel for each day of Advent and think about it for several minutes. Where will you find the gospel? Get out your Bible, and look it up using the references in the bulletin each week or the references on the insert in today's bulletin. Amen.