

Fourth Sunday Ordinary Time - B Cycle Jan. 31/ Feb. 1, 2015

INTRODUCTION: (*Deut 18, 15-20; I Cor. 7, 32-35; Mark 1, 21-28*)

Our second reading from Paul's letter to the Corinthians might be difficult to understand. So I would like to give a little background. The passage is from a section of Paul's letter where he is dealing with a question about **marriage and celibacy**. Paul began this topic by affirming the value of marriage and then he moves on, which is today's reading, to affirm the value of celibacy. His suggestion (not a rule), is directed to those who were not yet married or who were widowed and he points out the advantages of remaining unmarried. This suggestion is based on the expectation of the early Church that Jesus was going to return very soon and with his coming the world would come to an end. To quote what Paul said in last week's reading: "the time is running out" and "the world as we know it is passing away." If it seems as if Paul is overemphasizing the spiritual advantages of celibacy, consider how you might view things with regard to getting married and starting a family if you seriously thought that probably in a year or two the world would end and Jesus would return.

Some background about our first reading might also be helpful. It takes place on the East side of the Jordan River across from the Promised Land. After many years in the desert, God's people were ready to cross the Jordan and enter the land God promised to give them. Moses knew that very soon God would call him to leave this world and God's people would cross the Jordan and enter their new Land without him. Basically Moses is saying "goodbye." He assures them God would not leave them without direction or leadership. God would send them another prophet like himself who would speak God's word to them. We usually think of a prophet as a person who foretells the future, and sometimes the prophet did, but the best definition of a prophet is at the end of today's first reading: one who speaks God's word. Our first reading prepares us for the gospel where Jesus speaks God's word with power and authority.

HOMILY: From the very beginning of Mark's gospel, Mark wants us to know who Jesus is. He introduced his gospel with the words: "the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." Eight verses later John the Baptist testifies that Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit. Three verses after that Jesus is baptized and God in Heaven speaks to Jesus: "You are my beloved Son. With you I am well pleased." If we read down a few more verses, to verse 24, Mark again tells us about Jesus. This information comes from a very unexpected source, the devil, who acknowledges Jesus as "the Holy One of God." The people in the synagogue are impressed with the power in Jesus' teaching and they consider him a prophet; but the evil spirit already knows who Jesus is. By the way, this is the first miracle mentioned by St. Mark. He not only wants us to know who Jesus is but he wants us to know Jesus was not afraid of the evil powers in this world and was willing to face them head on.

When we were in catechism class, we were taught that temptations come from the world, the flesh and the devil. We've all experienced how the world and the flesh can lead us astray, but many people think of the devil as a myth. In my 50 years as a priest,

I am convinced through the daily news and through counseling I have done that devils are for real. Devils are smart enough **not** to make themselves obvious. That way they can work more effectively because we are not aware that they are busy doing their thing. I believe that Jesus' experience with demons was also real. I would grant that years ago epilepsy or mental illness was considered to be caused by demons, but I believe in other cases, it was the real thing Jesus was fighting against. Exorcisms make up the largest single category of healings in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. I have two last points.

1) Jesus is admired by many people today. He is considered a good person, a person who cared greatly about others and a great teacher. The Moslems even consider him a great prophet. But that's **all** he is in the minds of many people. We, as Christians, see him differently. He is not someone whom we can choose to follow or ignore depending on whether we agree with him or not. He is the Holy One of God; he is God's Son. When he speaks to us, we must listen to him. That's one of the reasons why we come to Mass on Sunday. The whole first part of the Mass focuses on hearing God's word and reflecting on it.

2) The devil: We don't hear much about the devil except in jokes. But the devil is not a joke. The Scriptures take him seriously. I have mentioned that in my experience as a priest and counselor, I definitely have come to believe there are evil powers at work in the world, which are called devils. I've never had any dramatic experiences like in today's gospel or like the movie *The Exorcist*, which, by the way was, in most respects, based on a true story. Here's why I think most of us are not aware of the devil's strategy, it's because the devil approaches us from where we are the weakest. The devil is very subtle. For example, if we're angry, the devil simply encourages us to keep feeling that way, and the devil may even suggest additional reasons why we should be boiling with anger. The same goes with other weaknesses, such as hatred, envy, laziness, pride, lust, greed, gluttony, etc. There is one stronger than the devil who will help us if we ask. He is a prophet greater than Moses – he is the Holy One of God and is God's Son. Ask his help in time of temptation. Amen.

Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time - B Cycle

February 8, 2015

INTRODUCTION: (*Job 7,1-4.6-7; I Cor 9,16-19.22-23; Mark 1,29-39*) We hear from Job in our first reading. He had been a prosperous and happy man. Then suddenly he lost everything; hostile tribes destroyed his cattle, his sheep, his camels and his workers. A violent wind collapsed the house where his children were gathered for a meal and it killed them all at once. Soon after, Job's health began to deteriorate and his skin was covered with sores. He laments: "I shall not see happiness again." Job, who was always faithful to God, complained God was being unfair to him. At the time this book was written, the pervading belief among the Jews was that if we are good, God will bless us, and if we're not good, all kinds of terrible things will happen to us. At the same

time the Jews were beginning to discover that life doesn't always work that way. Like Job we still struggle to answer the question of why good people suffer? The gospel is in contrast with the pathetic story of Job where we see Jesus at work trying to lessen people's sufferings by his many exorcisms and healings.

Contrary to Job who is deeply depressed, St. Paul, in today's second reading, is full of enthusiasm with his ministry of preaching the gospel. He's not doing it because he wants to get rich (actually, for the most part he provided for his own needs, working as a tentmaker). He is using himself as an example for the Corinthians to follow in teaching them to unselfishly serve God and lovingly serve one another.

HOMILY: Our readings today deal with one of the deepest mysteries of life, the problem of why good people suffer. It makes sense to most people that if someone is evil, and bad things happen to them, we say, well they deserved it. When someone doesn't seem to deserve it we ask "why?" Some people quietly judge "that person must have done something really bad to deserve what happened to them!" That's what Job's friends thought about Job. They told him "Job, you must have some hidden sin or you wouldn't be suffering like you are." Job protested that he didn't deserve what was happening to him. The book of Job goes on for 42 chapters trying to understand the problem of suffering. Was the Book of Job ever a true story? I believe it was and in a sense it is a true story of thousands of other people who lived or are living a life similar to Job's.

Our problem is that we believe in a God who can do anything and we believe in a God who is fair and just. We figure if God can do anything, why doesn't he help good people who are suffering? This is the mystery. In the Book of Job, the author, after struggling for 42 chapters to understand the problem of suffering, resolved it eventually by telling us that God heard Job's complaint and restored all of his property - giving him back twice the wealth he previously enjoyed. God gave Job three beautiful daughters who produced many grandchildren for him. Many readers of Job might say "that's great for Job, but I don't see something like that happening very often."

We see in the gospel Jesus' answer to suffering; he helped everyone who came to him for healing. Any town he visited would have loved to hold on to Jesus so he could keep everyone in town healthy. Jesus' agenda wasn't just to be a famous healer. He came to be our teacher; he came with a message intended for the whole world; he came to save us by giving his life for us. Jesus healed people wherever he was, and he sent his apostles out to heal as well. Jesus had to stay on the move so he could bring his message of forgiveness and love and salvation to as many people as possible.

When Jesus or his apostles did heal people, he showed us something about how God feels about suffering. God cares about us and he's with us in our suffering. He is not only with us, he even suffered for us. That care about those who suffer has continued on among Jesus' followers. Jesus' followers have always prayed for the sick and at times Jesus' healing power showed itself through those prayers. Wikipedia said "in-patient medical care, in the sense of what we today consider a hospital, was an

innovation driven by Christian mercy.” This innovation came about once Christians were allowed to practice their faith publicly under the Emperor Constantine.

The story of God caring about our suffering, Jesus’ willingness to suffer for us, and the readiness of his followers to care for those who are suffering does not end here. God promised to put an end to suffering altogether for those who have chosen to believe in him and to follow him. As Isaiah says so beautifully: “then the eyes of the blind shall see, and the ears of the deaf be opened; then the lame shall leap like a stag, and the mute tongue sing for joy.” (Is. 35, 5-6)

The resurrection of Jesus shows us what God has planned for those who love him. In the resurrection, Christ has triumphed over sin and death and he invites us to share in his victory. He only asks that we follow him and trust him. His resurrection, for those who believe, proves what St. Paul tells us, that “for those who love God, all things work out for the best.” That’s one of the verses from Paul that keeps me going. Amen.

1st Sunday of Lent - B Cycle

February 22, 2015

INTRODUCTION (*Gen. 9, 8-15; 1 Peter 3, 18-22; Mark 1, 12-15*)

I want to call your attention to the word “covenant” in today’s first reading. This important concept will dominate our first readings every week during Lent this year. Typically “covenants” were quite common centuries ago. They were somewhat similar to what we call a “contract” today. A “covenant” was a serious commitment or promise two parties (be they individuals or nations) made to each other. It defined the relationship and the expectations they had of one another. The word “covenant” is not in common use today except when people speak of the marriage covenant. (We also hear it at the consecration of the wine during Mass.) When God chose to enter into a relationship with his people, he made a covenant with them. He promised what he would do and told them what he expected of them. Today we hear about the covenant God made with Noah and with all of creation after the great flood. Notice this covenant is unusual in that God promises what he will do for his people while he asks nothing of his people in return. St. Peter, in the second reading, tells us the covenant God made with Noah and his family prefigured baptism which is God’s pledge to us of salvation and eternal life.

HOMILY – In our relations with God, there are moments of joy, moments when we feel God’s love and presence, and there are moments when we feel no comfort or consolation at all. I suspect Jesus went through such times too. In the section of the gospel, right before today’s gospel, we are told that when Jesus was baptized, the Spirit came down upon him like a dove and God’s voice spoke from heaven: “you are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.” Wouldn’t you assume that was a high moment for Jesus? Then the gospel tells us (which is today’s passage) at once the Spirit drove him out into the wilderness where he would be for forty days fasting and

praying. The excitement of the baptism was followed by, what I would suspect, was a long period of dryness. Most of us are familiar with the three temptations Matthew and Luke tell us about, but our gospel today is from Mark who says simply that he was tempted by Satan. The Greek word tempted can also mean he was tested by Satan - sort of a test of strength or endurance or fidelity and Jesus won the battle.

I think the test Jesus went through involved whether he would stay faithful to God's plan for him, a plan that would have very difficult times. Examples of some of the tests Jesus would have to go through could have been something like this: He could have chosen to use his special powers to his own advantage, like turning stones into bread when he was hungry, or for that matter, turning stones into gold when the apostles were out of money - but he didn't. He could have used his special powers to gain influence and popularity and prestige; some of the people who knew him wanted to make him their king, but he didn't agree. He could have walked away from those who came to arrest him in the Garden of Gethsemane, but he didn't. We can only speculate what Jesus experienced or thought about during those 40 days. We can assume that the presence of Satan, the forty days of fasting, and the arrest of John the Baptist foreshadowed, from the start, Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom would encounter major obstacles.

The example of Jesus is presented to us today to encourage us to always remain faithful to God especially during difficult times and to make the next 40 days a special time for ourselves to turn more to God. Getting to Church this past Wednesday to get ashes and to begin this Lenten season was difficult because of the weather. But if you missed Mass Wednesday, there is nothing stopping you from making the next 40 days a holy time, a time to pray a little more, a time to think more about God's goodness and love and about loving him more and loving each other more genuinely.