

INTRODUCTION – (*Ezekiel 18, 25-28*) (*Matthew 21, 28-32*) In 587 B.C. when the Babylonians conquered the Jews, destroyed their Temple, burnt their cities and took the surviving Jews to Babylon as captives and slaves, the Jews concluded God was punishing them for the sins of their ancestors. They complained that God was not being fair to them. In our first reading, we hear God tell them, through his prophet Ezekiel, it is because of their own sins that they were suffering. Yet with God the situation is never hopeless. They could always change their ways. The message to us is if we have damaged our relationship with God, we can always turn things around.

HOMILY – Our gospel could be better understood if we know what preceded it. In the preceding section of the gospel, we are told that Holy Week was beginning and Jesus had just arrived in Jerusalem in a triumphal manner, riding on a donkey with the crowds shouting “Hosanna to the Son of David.” The word “Hosanna” means: “save us.” The people were bestowing on Jesus a kingly title, and Jesus did not silence them as the chief priests and scribes wanted him to do. This title (Save us Son of David) could have caused a significant upheaval in the city of David where the Temple was and where the Romans were especially watchful for any signs of revolt or insurrection. After Jesus’ royal authority was acclaimed, he went into the Temple and drove out all those who were in the business of buying and selling animals for sacrifice and he overturned the tables of the money changers. Naturally, the religious leaders challenged Jesus. He was stepping on their turf. They demanded to know where he got the authority to do what he had just done. So Jesus challenges them with the parable you just heard in today’s gospel.

The parable of the two sons shows us two children who must have been a handful for their father. Neither one responded obediently to the father’s request for help in the vineyard. The first boy said “no” to the father – in that culture it was a real insult. Because it was so insulting, one can suppose that he felt guilty enough about it to go to work in the vineyard after all. The second son answered “yes,” but never picked even a single grape.

“Which of the two did his father’s will?” is the main point in today’s gospel. The son who said “no” at first, then changed his mind and went to work was the son who actually did what his father wanted. The other son was agreeable only verbally, but he was of no use to his father when it came to doing the job that needed to be done. Jesus is comparing the second son to the elders and chief priests in the way they responded to John the Baptist. The religious leaders were all talk but no change. According to Jesus, even the worst sinners (tax collectors and prostitutes) listened to John the Baptist and repented.

This is a theme of actually doing what God wants us to do - a theme that we find frequently in all the gospels but especially in Matthew. I could easily give you a half dozen texts where Jesus stresses over and over that it’s what we do, not what we say we will do, that is important to our salvation.

Our faith is not just a matter of saying the right words. Example: how well does it work in marriage if one partner is always agreeable but never follows through, or are your bosses or teachers pleased with you where you go to work or school when you talk a good talk but never accomplish what you are supposed to do? Our faith includes expressing ourselves in prayer and ritual (i.e., using fitting word) but it also requires that we put into action the message that Jesus has given us. If we haven't been living the way Jesus has taught us, it's never too late to change things around as the young man in the gospel shows us.

I know you might be thinking I'm preaching to the wrong people, but even if one or two people get the message and are helped by it, it was worth it. Amen.

27th Sunday in Ordinary Time – A Cycle

October 8, 2017

INTRODUCTION - (*Isaiah 5,1-7; Matthew 21,33-43*) Most of us know how much work is involved in caring for a garden. Just imagine how much work is involved with setting up an entire vineyard. It is a full-time occupation. In today's first reading, Isaiah the prophet, who lived in the 8th century BC, describes some of what was involved in caring for a vineyard. If we wonder why there needed to be a watchtower in the vineyard, it was needed, both day and night, to protect the grapes from thieves and predators - especially during harvest time. Apparently Isaiah was a musician as well as a talented poet. As he sang his song, we can imagine the shock his audience felt when they discovered they were the vineyard he was singing about. From history we know Isaiah's prophecy about the destruction of the vineyard literally proved to be true when, first the Assyrians, then later, the Babylonians invaded the land of Israel and destroyed most of the cities in the northern kingdom of Israel.

HOMILY – Isaiah's focus is on the grapes. Although they had received excellent care, the grapes ended up to be sour grapes. Jesus' focus was on the caretakers of the vineyard. They may have provided good care to the vineyard and the grapes may have been delicious, but the caretakers were trying to steal the vineyard for themselves. They abused or killed anyone who might get in their way. They even managed to kill the son of the man who owned the vineyard. Jesus quotes psalm 118 verse 22-23 – a psalm that is quoted multiple times in the New Testament. It goes like this: “the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; by the Lord has this been done, and it is wonderful in our eyes.” What does this psalm tell us. It tells us, although the owner's son was rejected by the workers who thought they could steal the vineyard, they wouldn't stand a chance against the owner of the vineyard. He probably had enough money to hire himself a little army. As the robbers fled, he would successfully regain control of his property, bore than that, his son, who was rejected by the robbers, would in some marvelous way regain his position of power and authority as was rightfully his. It seems impossible but according to the psalm verse the event would be called wonderful. In other words, a powerful good would come out of the tragic and evil actions of the workers in the vineyard.

What seems like a tragedy in one circumstance may bring unexpected blessings – we don't know how. This week we have been asking ourselves how can God allow bad things to happen. God has given us a free will. We can use it for good or for evil. If God's Son was crucified and was put to death, the greatest evil anyone could have created, and God has used that as a source of grace and life for all of us, then he can draw good out of any catastrophe. This week we lament the massacre of 58 innocent people in Los Vegas. Even killing one innocent person is a tragic happening – it's hard to put into words how tragic is the death of 20 or 50 or 100. But we're not in charge. I would lose my mind if I didn't have St. Paul to fall back on. He told us for those who love God, all things work out for the best.

Prayer needs to be expressed whenever we hear of such tragedies. Prayer and hope for a better world is sometimes all we have.

28th Sunday Ordinary Time – A Cycle **Oct. 15, 2017**

INTRODUCTION: (*Isaiah 25, 6-10a; Matthew 22, 1-14*) Today's first reading and today's gospel give us a beautiful picture of what it is we're praying for when we say "thy will be done." God's will is for our complete and eternal happiness. Our gospel warns us, however, that in order to be part of his beautiful plan, we need to respond to the invitation he offers us. This passage from Isaiah is one of my favorite passages in the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament).

HOMILY: I know many of you have come this evening to wish me a happy birthday. I am grateful for your affection and your support. To thank you, I thought I would give you a few quotes from that great philosopher, Will Rogers. Will Rogers said about growing older: "eventually you will reach a point when you stop lying about your age and start bragging about it." My uncle delighted in bragging about his age to everybody he met until he passed away at 96. Will Rogers also said: "you know you are getting old when everything either dries up or leaks." Also from Will Rogers: "I don't know how I got over the hill without getting to the top." Or: "one of the many things no one tells you about aging is that it's such a nice change from being young. Being young is beautiful, but being old is comfortable and relaxed. If you don't learn to laugh at trouble, you won't have anything to laugh at when you're old."

I don't know yet how it feels to be 80. As long as I have good health, it feels pretty good. If you want to pray for me, pray that I can keep doing the Lord's work with good health.

Our first reading seems to describe a celebration of some sort. The details are not clear. Perhaps it is a celebration of God's victory over one of Israel's neighboring nations with whom there was some serious conflict. Perhaps the conflict was with Moab (no one knows for sure). The celebration the reading describes would have been on Mt. Zion – in Jerusalem. For a people who lived hand to mouth, it was a very appealing picture of the end of time and the final judgment that was to come.

Jesus' parable also speaks of a great banquet a king prepared for his son's wedding. Wedding celebrations lasted for several days in that culture, so one can assume the king's celebration would really be a blast. Those previously invited suddenly found excuses not to come to the banquet. Considering the killing of the king's servants, it appears to be some kind of rebellion against the king – a rebellion that rained death upon the rebels.

The rejection of the servants and the fatal rebellion is usually a description of what actually did happen to Jerusalem in the year 70 AD. Those first invited, that is the Jews, would be left out of the party. However, the king was determined to celebrate his son's wedding – so he filled the banquet hall with whomever could be found. Like today's Church, God's kingdom would be made up of a coming together of many folks from various lands.

The main lesson to be learned is that admission to the kingdom is not enough to guarantee getting to stay in it. God wants us to be part of his kingdom, but being part of the kingdom requires a certain response, certain expectations that the king has of us.

We may not always meet all that is expected of us, but our king is merciful and forgiving if we turn to him, and he will help us if we ask. Amen

29th Sunday Ordinary Time – A Cycle

October 22, 2017

INTRODUCTION: (*Isaiah 45, 1.4-6; Mt. 22, 15-21*) Roughly six hundred years before Christ, the Babylonians (people living in what is Iraq today) conquered the Jews, destroyed everything they could and took most of the Jews to Babylon to be their slaves. Roughly 50 years later, the Persians (people living in what is Iran today) conquered the Babylonians. Cyrus was king of Persia at that time and he allowed the Jews to return to their own home in Israel. He even encouraged them to rebuild their temple to Yahweh. In today's first reading, we hear how the prophet saw God working through the Persian king, Cyrus. He calls Cyrus God's anointed. Cyrus, of course, claimed that he had overcome the Babylonians by his own strength and shrewdness. Isaiah said it was God who made it happen. We who believe in God's sovereign power believe that even though God chooses to work through human agents, God is still supreme and Lord throughout all of history and to him belongs all glory and honor.

HOMILY: In Matthew's gospel, we are in the last week of Jesus' life. The hostility toward Jesus had been rising rapidly after Jesus had cleansed the Temple. In today's gospel the Pharisees, who would have liked to see him dead, took an opportunity to try to get him in trouble. They approached him along with the Herodians. This is significant. The Pharisees hated the Romans who were ruling Israel and the Herodians were favorable toward the Romans and cooperated with them. This left Jesus in trouble with one group or the other depending on how he answered the question about paying taxes to Rome.

You might find it interesting to know that the tax in question was to be paid with a Roman coin which contained an image of the emperor and had on it the words: "Tiberius Caesar, august son of the divine Augustus." The Jews were against images to start with, and they would certainly have been against the reference to Caesar Augustus as divine. In spite of any objections, they may have had to Roman rule, however, Jesus' inquisitors were able to produce a Roman coin since Jesus didn't have one. By the way, the tax was a census tax – something the Jews had to pay simply for the Romans to allow them to stay alive. The value of the tax was one denarius owed by everyone between the ages of 12 or 14 to age 65. A denarius was one full day's pay for a laborer (things sure have changed.) There were other taxes, of course, taxes on what a farmer produced or what was transported, but there was a considerable amount of opposition among the Jews to this particular tax, not because it was excessive, I suspect, but more out of principle.

Jesus' answer was brilliant. Since the coin was a Roman coin and had the emperor's name and image engraved on it, it belonged to the emperor who could demand it at any time. So Jesus said, give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, but (and this is the important message in Jesus' answer) don't forget to give to God what belongs to God (love, prayer, obedience and financial sacrifice – including tithing). In his answer, Jesus basically allowed for limited cooperation with the Romans, but he did not allow for cheating God of what rightfully was owed to God.

Today's gospel gives me the opportunity to present our financial report to our parishioners, a report that the bishop requires us to present each year. A copy of the report is in the pew. You may recall that our fiscal year goes from July 1 to June 30. The Sunday collections for last fiscal year (ending June 30) are down slightly (about 1 %) and if it were not for some generous bequests and generous gifts, we would have ended the fiscal year in the red. We are grateful for the thoughtfulness of those who remembered us in death, but we are saddened for their having left us. What does worry me is when I look at what is currently coming in through the Sunday collection; this fiscal year is about 11% in the red. If we receive no bequests or special gifts, we are headed toward a deficit of \$50,000.

As regards the school report, it seems that every year since I've been here we drew up a deficit budget at the beginning of the fiscal year and ended up in the black at the end of the fiscal year. I am convinced God wants our school to be here. About 90-95% of our children are growing up in families who have to live below the poverty level. They are thriving here and they are getting a good education.

Thank you for listening to my report. You can take it home with you if you wish. If you have any questions, feel free to call. If you have any excess of cash, give us a thought. Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God means we must "be as careful about our obligations to God as one is about one's obligations to Caesar." {*Sacra Pagina, Gospel of Matthew, Daniel Harrington, SJ, pg 310*}

At the time of Jesus, the Jewish leaders considered there were 613 precepts or commands in their law. It was often debated by the Jewish rabbis which of these 613 laws was the most important. So Jesus was asked what is the greatest. He states two, not one, as basic and central to everything else.

Our first reading and gospel present us with a very challenging topic: love. Most of us automatically associate that word “love” with romance, joy, and warm feelings. Sometimes it is that; however there are times when it’s a matter of dedication, loyalty and commitment. Those who have matured in life know that at times it is delightful and at times it’s hard work.

When Jesus said the second commandment is like the first, he was saying the two commandments are similar to one another in importance. Warm feelings of affection may fill us when we go to Mass or when we think of all the ways God has blessed us. Such feelings are very helpful, but love for God commands us to love and serve God even when those feelings are absent. And loving our neighbor, even the ones we don’t like, does not require feeling affection for them, but it means taking their needs seriously.

One of the things I see the most in my ministry is an attitude that it is not necessary to worry about the first commandment (love of God) if we are concerned about keeping the second (love of neighbor). It’s like saying “who does Jesus think he is, trying to tell me what is important in my life.” Worship is an important part of our love for God. Keeping holy the Lord’s Day is our way of recognizing God’s dominion over us and expressing the gratitude we owe him.

Giving love and receiving love between God and ourselves and between God and others have proven to be ways to live a joyful and healthy life. Babies who have had to remain in a hospital and have had perfect care but had no one to love them or cuddle them died at a far faster rate than babies who were not starved of affection. In a Harvard study of 7000 subjects, people who had bad health habits (smoking, obesity, etc., which I’m not recommending) but who had good friends to associate with survived their bad habits better than those who lived alone with little social contact but who had good health habits. Now, don’t take what I’m saying as a green light to sit around all day drinking beer with your buddies. One of the researchers for that particular study did say “it’s better to eat Twinkies with good friends than to eat broccoli alone. Of course, I’m not recommending one over the other. Practicing good health habits and having good social contacts are, all things considered, the best way to stay healthy. Another researcher on another Harvard study said if you belong to no group but decide to join one, you cut your risk of dying over the next year in half.

Before I get in trouble with the doctors and nurses in our parish for stepping into their territory, I better keep quiet. Let me say love is essential to our physical and emotional well-being and love is our primary calling as followers of Christ.