

Fourteenth Ordinary – A Cycle

July 3, 2005

INTRODUCTION - At the time of Zechariah whom, we hear in today's first reading, God's people had been under the rule of foreign nations for about 250 years. First there were the Babylonians, then the Persians, then the Greeks. So when the prophet Zechariah tells God's people "Rejoice!" many of them probably thought he had been out in the sun too long. But God's prophet has reason to be full of joy. He could see in the future a time when there would be no more war, or exile, destruction or conquest. One day they would have their own king. Their king would come to them riding on a donkey. Why a donkey and not a horse? A horse was a weapon of war. Horses were used by warriors and conquerors. A donkey was symbolic of **his** peaceful nature and of the peaceful nature of **his kingdom**. Horses and other instruments of war would be outlawed in his kingdom. We still await the fulfillment of Zechariah's prophecy. God's faithful people remembered this prophecy when Jesus came riding into Jerusalem on a donkey on Palm Sunday. We're not at Palm Sunday yet, however, as we read from an earlier section of Matthew's gospel today; we see Jesus revealed himself early on in his ministry as a man of peace who is meek and humble of heart. And that's why the section of Zechariah was chosen for our first reading.

HOMILY - We just heard Jesus say "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me..." A few years ago I decided to do this homily using a visual aid. I decided to find a yoke and show it to everyone (and I'm not talking about the yellow part of an egg). It's basically a large piece of wood, shaped to fit over the shoulders of two animals like oxen or mules and it was securely held on their shoulders by a strap that went under their neck. A chain was attached to the center of the yoke and the chain was attached to a wagon or a plow which the animals pulled as they moved forward. At the time of Jesus, I'm sure yokes were about as common as tractors and trucks are today. You wouldn't believe what a hard time I had trying to find a yoke. I finally found one in a friend's old barn.

Up until a few hundred years ago, the yoke was a very commonly used item but it also had a symbolic meaning. It symbolized slavery and servitude. For example, the prophet Jeremiah, right before the Babylonian exile, wore a yoke to demonstrate to God's people that they would be defeated by the Babylonians and they would be taken into exile as slaves of the Babylonians. When a false prophet broke the yoke Jeremiah had, God said it would be replaced with a yoke of iron (indicating the certainty of the exile) and indeed

Jeremiah's words proved to be true.

At the time of Jesus, sometimes the Jewish law was referred to as a yoke, a burden to be endured. The way the Scribes and Pharisees interpreted God's law certainly proved to be a burden on God's people. (Mt. 23,4) When Jesus said "take **my** yoke upon you and learn from me," he was contrasting his way, his teachings to the Jewish leaders' incorrect and burdensome interpretations of God's law that the people would hear weekly in their synagogues. The spirit behind Jesus' teachings would lift their burdens and be refreshing. "Come to me all you who labor and are burdened and I will give you rest."

I think there are two ideas that are worth reflecting on. 1) Jesus said "my yoke is easy and my burden light." Every law is a burden, and this includes even the laws Jesus gave us, for law involves obligations and responsibilities, things we have to do and obey. But when we obey his law, we discover it is not overburdening, rather it will lift our spirits and will lead us to eternal life. St. Paul talks to us today about sin, which is another word for disobedience to God. He tells us how when we sin we become indebted to sin. Next week he'll tell us more about how sin can enslave us, while living according to the Spirit gives us life.

Tomorrow we celebrate Independence Day. But there's no independence from God. We treasure our freedom in this country, but if we think freedom is doing anything we want we won't have any freedom at all. I like to use a sailboat as an example. If we let it be free, if we let go of the sails and the rudder and let it go where it pleases, it will eventually crash against something. If we keep hold of the rudder to steer it and we keep the sail at the correct angle in relation to the wind, it will take us where we want to go. God's laws are meant to keep us steering our life in the right direction, they are meant to guide us to true happiness. They do not limit our freedom as some think, but they guide us toward true inner freedom, the freedom to become our best selves.

2) The other thing about a yoke is that it joins two animals together. With a yoke, one animal does not pull the wagon or the plow alone. When Jesus said "come to me...take my yoke upon you," he is our partner in bearing our

burdens. We won't be alone. He promised at the Last Supper he would not leave us orphans (Jn. 14,18) All we need to do, and sometimes we need to do it every day, is to commit ourselves to following him and he will be there for us. We can be sure of that!

I would like to conclude with a quote by James Madison (the fourth president of the United States) which I read recently: "We have staked the whole of all our political institutions upon the capacity of mankind for self-government, upon the capacity of each and all of us to govern ourselves, to control ourselves, to sustain ourselves according to the Ten Commandments of God." And as a Catholic I feel I must add to this quote from James Madison "we must sustain ourselves according to the great commandment of Jesus, the law of love." Amen.

Fifteenth Ordinary – A Cycle

July 10, 2005

INTRODUCTION The prophet, whom we hear in today's first reading, was speaking to God's captive people in Babylon. It was through the prophet that God told his people they would be able to return home. The exile was ended. After 50 years in captivity, I'm sure it would have been hard to believe it was over. God attempts to assure them his promise will be fulfilled. Like the rain that comes down and does the job it is meant to do, thus giving life to the world, so God's word will be effective and will not be just an empty promise. It is a good introduction to the parable of the sower and the seed.

HOMILY We live in a society that likes instant results. We go to the grocery to buy instant meals and we get in the shortest line on the way out. The internet provides us with instant information and we enjoy instant replays when we're watching sports. The most popular games at bingo are the instants. If I could produce an instant homily, I am sure most people would love it. Now I don't like to waste time and I happen to look for the shortest line when I want to cash out at the supermarket. But we can't avoid the reality that some things just take time. People who are highly successful in life didn't get where they're at without patience and effort, whether that's in the arts, sports, business or the

academic field. Jesus is telling us in today's gospel that spiritual growth also takes time, patience and perseverance. And our spiritual growth is the most important thing of all. It will endure forever.

A normal farmer would be very careful not to waste seed by throwing it on rocky ground or footpaths or into weeds. Seed is expensive. But in the parable, the farmer is not just an ordinary farmer. The farmer stands for God and when he scattered the seed it went everywhere. In other words, God's call and his grace are offered to everyone without discrimination.

In the parable, the seed is the word of God that Jesus preached. Not everyone was receptive to his message. Some people listened to Jesus' teachings, liked his stories then quickly forgot what they were intended to teach. Some would get very enthusiastic about what they heard, then other things quickly became more important. Some were even hostile to him. But there would be some who would listen to his message and open their hearts to him. They were the ones who grew in God's grace.

One of the most detrimental things to our spiritual development is discouragement, discouragement that we're not growing faster. Religion is very emotional and we want God's grace and God's love to lift us up, to spur us on, to fill us with joy each day, and some days it does. But other days we let discouragement get the better of us. The wonderful things we think our faith should do for us do not seem to be there. And so we give up on our faith too quickly and God's grace and love become in us the seed that withers and dies. The most important thing the parable teaches us is perseverance, perseverance in our spiritual journey. Our prayers are not always wonderful, our lives are not always sinless, our charity is not always perfect. We have lots of imperfections and the more we grow spiritually, the more we become aware of them. The most important thing is to keep trying. When we give up, we go backwards.

Thomas Edison said, "I never did anything worth doing by accident, nor

did any of my inventions come by accident; they came by work.” In another place he said, “Opportunity is missed by most people because it is dressed in overalls and looks like work.” A Russian proverb tells us to “Pray to God, but keep rowing to the shore.” Coleman Cox said, “Even the woodpecker owes his success to the fact that he uses his head and keeps pecking away until he finishes the job he starts.” Mother Teresa is as profound as all the rest of them, “To keep a lamp burning, we have to keep putting oil in it.” God’s grace, like a plant, needs to keep being watered by prayer, the sacraments and good works.

God offers his grace freely, but we can’t ignore it, can’t sit on it, can’t let it be choked out by distractions or laziness or taken from us by the devil’s tempting. We have to nurture it and that’s why we’re here today.

Sixteenth Ordinary – A Cycle

July 17, 2005

On vacation in Aspen!

Seventeenth Ordinary – A Cycle

July 24, 2005

Deacon Jerry Yetter preached a wonderful homily! I’m sorry I don’t have a copy to share with you.

Eighteenth Ordinary – A Cycle

July 31, 2005

INTRODUCTION: Today’s first reading sounds like an invitation to a summer picnic. But it is not. The prophet was speaking to God’s people who were captives and exiles in Babylon over 500 years before Christ, announcing that their captivity was ended. God was getting ready to bring them back home. The rich and abundant food mentioned in this reading symbolized the blessings they would soon enjoy. Those who come to receive God’s blessings will be satisfied beyond their wildest dreams and those who come to him would receive these blessings free of charge. Notice how often the word “come” is used. Too often we allow temptation to lead us away from God, looking for happiness and satisfaction in the wrong places only to end up paying dearly for something that was worth little or nothing. If the food mentioned here sounds pretty common and ordinary, I’m sure

some of the foods mentioned were luxuries for an exiled and enslaved people! Our first reading is meant to prepare us for the gospel where Jesus feeds a multitude in a miraculous way.

HOMILY: There was a minister who began his sermon every Sunday by first bowing his head for a moment of prayer. One day his little daughter asked him why he did that. He was pleased that his daughter noticed this gesture of prayer he started with and he told her “I ask God to help me preach a good sermon.” Then she said, “Then why doesn’t he help you do it?” Notice, I never bow my head before I preach for fear some one might say that to me some day!

Seriously though, the little girl found out God doesn’t always give us everything we ask for. But in today’s first reading he tells us he will give us what we truly need if we come to him. In the gospel we hear how Jesus responded to the needs of the people who came to him.

St. Matthew describes Jesus feeding the people by telling us: “he took bread, said the blessing, broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples.” The connection with the Eucharist is obvious and deliberate. As St. Matthew tells us about the miracle of the loaves and fishes, he wants us to be aware of how Jesus feeds us in a miraculous way in the Eucharist.

There was an article in the Catholic Telegraph this past week describing a study of Catholics in Britain. I’m sure it’s the same on this side of the Atlantic Ocean. The study said many Catholics are getting away from regular Mass attendance and the sacraments because of the high stress in their lives. They are exhausted by the end of the week with all the demands of home and job, and Church is just one more thing to do and the easiest thing to skip. The report said “Families who do go to Mass regularly are making tremendous sacrifices to do so.”

And yet, this is where we will best find the strength and help we need to cope and to survive. Jesus promises it to us. Research has shown that, in general, those who attend Church regularly live happier and more successful lives. It is natural for us to think of Jesus feeding us when we go to Holy Communion. For he feeds us then with his own body and blood. But another way he feeds us that we may not think of is with his word. He tells us in the first reading: “come to me heedfully,” in other words come alert and attentively. He tells us “listen, that you may have life.”

Before Jesus feeds us with himself in Communion, he feeds our minds and hearts with his word. We hear over and over how our health is affected by the food we

eat. What we feed our minds affects, not only our health, but also our moods, our attitudes, our values, our relationships with others and with God. Questions we might ask ourselves are: 1) How much time do we spend reading trash? 2) How many hours a day is the TV on in our homes? 3) How much time do we sit at our Lord's feet letting him feed our minds and hearts with his presence? 4) How willing are we to believe him when he says: "heed me, and you shall eat well, you shall delight in rich fare. Come to me heedfully, listen, that you may have life." On average, I spend two hours a day in prayer. I'm not saying this to brag, but to assure you it is a real source of strength for me.

I would like to give an example of someone whose life changed and who was a dynamic force for good in the world because he let our Lord feed his mind and heart. The example is from the life of St. Ignatius Lyola who started the Jesuit order. He died in Rome on this day (July 31st) almost 450 years ago. In his younger years, St. Ignatius was a soldier, on his way to military fame and fortune. In a particular battle a cannon ball shattered his leg. During his long convalescence waiting for his leg to heal, he wanted to pass the time with some books about war and knights in shining armor, which were his favorite topics, but none were available. Gutenberg had lived only 100 years earlier, so there were not a lot of books to read. All Ignatius could find was a book about Christ and books on the lives of the saints. So out of desperation he read them. He tells us during this time something interesting happened to him. When he thought about worldly things and knights and fair damsels he felt intense pleasure. But when he gave these thoughts up out of weariness he felt dry and depressed. Yet when he thought of the saints and spiritual things he not only experienced pleasure but, even after he dismissed these thoughts, he still experienced great joy. He didn't notice this right away, but one day, in a moment of insight, it became obvious to him and he marveled at the difference.

St. Ignatius came to Christ and let himself be fed by Christ's Holy Spirit. It changed his life and it continues to influence the world for the better because of the spiritual renewal he began in the Church through his order. Life is full of stress and pressure for all of us. Sure we can see prayer and the Mass as one more thing to do, and it always feels that way before we start to pray or before we get ready to go to Mass, but when we truly open ourselves to its power we will receive a peace and strength that the world cannot give. Jesus promises it.