

Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 6, 2008

INTRODUCTION – Three hundred years is a long time. In our nation, three hundred years would take us back to before George Washington was born and long before our Declaration of Independence. In our first reading we hear from Zechariah the prophet. For those who first heard Zechariah's words, there would have been the realization that it had been three hundred years since their country had a king and had known independence. They could recall their sad history that three hundred years earlier their homes and lands, their city and their Temple had been destroyed and they were exiled to Babylon and became Babylonian slaves. Then the Persians conquered the Babylonians, allowed the Jews to return home, but continued to rule them and to collect taxes from those they ruled. Then came the Greeks who conquered Israel and who eventually bitterly persecuted Jews who would not give up their faith and their traditions. So when the prophet Zechariah tells God's people, "Rejoice!" many of them probably thought he had been out in the sun far too long. But God's prophet has reason to be full of joy. The role of a prophet is to see clearly what others cannot see. He could see a time when there would be no more war, or exile, destruction or conquest. He could see that one day they would have their own king, a king who would bring peace. That is the symbol of the donkey in the first reading. Horses were weapons of war, used by warriors and conquerors. Horses, chariots, warriors' bows and other instruments of war would be outlawed in his kingdom. The people of Jerusalem remembered this prophecy when Jesus came riding into Jerusalem on a donkey on Palm Sunday. We're not at Palm Sunday yet. But we hear in today's gospel Jesus reveals himself as a man of peace who is meek and humble of heart. That's why the passage from Zechariah was chosen for our first reading. Someday after we learn to better follow Jesus, the man of peace, maybe we will then see Zechariah's prophecy of peace fully fulfilled.

HOMILY - Up until a few hundred years ago, the yoke was very common. It would join two animals together so their combined strength could pull a plow or wagon. Now we have trucks and tractors to do the work of animals. The word yoke also had a symbolic meaning. It symbolized slavery and servitude.

At the time of Jesus, the Jewish law sometimes 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. When we obey his law, we discover it is not overburdening, rather it will lift our spirits and will lead us to eternal life. Sin,

which is another word for disobedience to God, puts a burden on us. St. Paul tells us when we sin we become indebted to sin. We all know what debt can do to us. It weighs us down. Next week Paul will tell us more about how sin can enslave us, while living according to the Spirit gives us life.

This past week we celebrated our 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 think the image of a sailboat is a good example of what I'm saying. I used to sail a lot. It was important that you kept your hand on the tiller and kept the sail at the right angle to the wind. If you let the boat go free, it would be a disaster. Many times I turned wrong into the wind and got blown over. Once, on a really cold, windy day, I spent a couple of hours in very cold water before someone rescued me. I never told this story before because having to be rescued is embarrassing for a sailor. In our own lives we need to keep going in the right direction to find peace and happiness, and God's laws are meant to keep us going in that direction. God's way is not to limit our freedom as sometimes people think, but to guide us to peace and happiness. When we ignore or violate his law (which is sin) we become a slave to our own worst 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 offering to be our partner in bearing our burdens. He is telling us we won't go through life 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! Amen.

Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 13, 2008

INTRODUCTION: The prophet, whom we hear in today's first reading, was speaking to God's captive people in Babylon. Through the prophet, God is telling them they would soon be able to return home. Their exile, which lasted 50 years, was suddenly at an end. No doubt this seemed like an impossibility. God assures them his promise will be fulfilled. God said his word is like the rain. When God sends the rain it does the work of keeping the world green and alive. When God sends out his word, it is not full of empty promises, but it has the power to be effective.

HOMILY: Today we have a choice as to whether to do the long form or short form of the gospel. I chose the short form, because I believe most of us already know that Jesus was the one who scattered the seed by speaking God's word to all who would listen. Not everyone responded in the same way. Some ignored him, some received his message with enthusiasm but quickly forgot or was easily distracted. Some took God's word to heart and grew in God's grace and love. God's word was generously offered to all people, but not everyone benefited from it.

Another purpose Jesus may have had in telling this parable was to help his apostles understand why everyone did not follow Jesus with as much excitement as they did.

It is a parable so rich in meaning that it has other interpretations as well. I came across a delightful story by Megan McKenna in her book: *Parables: the Arrows of God* which might give us another way of looking at today's parable.

There was a woman who was depressed over the state of the world. She longed for love among her family and friends, peace among all people, compassion for the poor and vulnerable. There were problems everywhere as she saw so much selfishness, greed, hatred, lack of moral values.

One day she came upon a little shop. She walked in and was surprised to see someone behind the counter who reminded her of Jesus. She couldn't believe it really was Jesus, but the similarity was so striking that she just had to go to him and ask: "Excuse me, are you Jesus?" "I am." "Do you work here?" "No, I am the owner." "What do you sell here?" "Well, I really don't sell anything. It's all free. I have here just about anything you might want. You're welcome to walk around the aisles and see what you might be interested in. Make a list of all the things you want and bring it back to me. I'll see what I can do for you." She was amazed at what she saw on the shelves: peace on earth, food to feed the hungry, clean air and water, warm clothing for the poor, forgiveness. The woman compiled a long list and brought it back to Jesus. When Jesus looked at all the items she had written down he smiled and said "no problem." He bent down behind the counter and ran his fingers through several boxes. He then stood up and laid out a series of small envelopes for the woman. "What are these?" she asked. "Seed packets," Jesus replied. "This is a catalogue store." "You mean I don't get the finished product?" she asked. "No," Jesus said. "Just take these seeds home, plant them and nurture them and help them grow and you will be quite pleased with the results." She said "Oh!" and left the store without taking anything with her. Most of us want God to solve problems for us overnight, and when he does that's great, but mostly he gives us the means and the help we need and calls us to have faith and patience. Live by God's word, it will not disappoint us. As God promised in today's first reading: "my word will not return to me void, but shall do my will, achieving the end for which I sent it."

Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 20, 2008

INTRODUCTION

The first reading today could be difficult to follow. It is from the book of Wisdom, a book of the bible written about 100 years before Christ. At this time, the Jews were being persecuted for their faith. Many Jews were giving up their belief in God and going over to pagan ways. The author of this book is struggling with the question: "why is God allowing this evil to go on?" His

conclusion is that God's power is not directed toward evil people, but it shows itself in God's patience, wanting people to repent and allowing them time to do so. This theme prepares us for the gospel, which also deals with the problem of evil.

HOMILY

I'll start with the parable of the wheat and the weeds. A few months ago I had a conversation with a professed atheist. He was convinced that God could not exist because there was so much evil in the world. I wasn't able to convince him otherwise. He was like the farm workers in today's gospel who wanted to go out into the field and pull up all the weeds. No one who tries to grow a garden lets the weeds grow along with the flowers and vegetables they plant, but as with many of Jesus' parables, God does exactly what we would not expect. The owner of the farm, who represents God, said let the wheat and weeds grow together and we'll separate them at harvest time. Because God does not always do things the way we think he should, many people often get angry with God or turn away altogether. They forget who's the Master.

Thank God who is so patient, or there might be a mighty small population in today's world. If any of us think we're the ones God would not pluck up, then you can sign up after Mass to begin your canonization process. Other than the Blessed Virgin and Jesus himself, we're all sinners and in need of salvation. I personally am most grateful that God is patient with me.

Although we admit we all fail to be as holy as we know we should be, and we know God is patient and merciful, this is not the time to beat ourselves up. This is a time to be grateful for his way of dealing with us stems from his infinite love for us. That is the deeper mystery. God delights in us, even though we have weeds growing in our garden. He gives us his help to continue growing in holiness. This idea connects with the other two parables about the mustard seed and the yeast, for growth is a slow process.

Of course these two parables are originally meant to describe the kingdom that God is establishing through the ministry of Jesus Christ, a kingdom that started with a very tiny group of followers and continues to grow. I'll bet the apostles would never have imagined that it would still be growing 2000 years later and would number 2 billion followers of Christ (if you include in that number all Christian denominations).

However, we can see these two parables from a personal perspective in that, although we want to love and serve God, we do not become perfect overnight. We must be patient with ourselves for growth takes much longer than we want it to at times. It will happen if we keep doing the best we can to pray and to do what God wants. St. Paul's letter to the Romans is apropos when he tells us in today's second reading we do not know how to pray as we ought, so the Holy Spirit helps us in our prayers by interceding for us.

That points out what is so unique about the Mass. The Mass is the greatest, and as Jesus said, the most powerful way to pray. We are joined together in prayer. The Mass is also great because it is the prayer and perfect sacrifice of Jesus, and we get to join our prayer and worship with his. There are lots of wonderful and powerful prayers and the Holy Spirit helps us in our

prayers. Most of all the Spirit is with us now as we thank God for his goodness to us and ask his blessing upon us.

Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 27, 2008

INTRODUCTION

King David died about 970 years before Christ. His son, Solomon, succeeded him as king of Israel. Today's first reading is Solomon's prayer as he begins his reign. He prayed for an understanding heart that he would reign well. Of all the gifts he could have asked for, he valued wisdom more than anything else. God's commands guide us to wisdom, so in the psalm refrain we praise God for this gift.

HOMILY

Again this Sunday we hear Jesus teaching us about the kingdom of heaven. The parable about the net thrown in the sea was explained and the first two parables about the treasure and the pearl are pretty obvious. However, I have a story that will help us think more deeply about the idea of a treasure.

A lady wrote this story about herself. She recalled that when she was a child her wealthy parents would take an extended vacation every summer and they would leave their child in the care of a sitter. When the girl was eleven, the sitter quit right before the parents were to go on vacation, but the parents were able to hire a substitute. The girl came upon her mother wrapping up and hiding all the family jewels and silverware. The little girl asked why, since her mother had never done that before. Her mother explained she could not trust the new sitter with the family valuables. You can imagine how the little girl interpreted this remark. The parents were trusting the sitter with their daughter but not with anything that had material value. Was she not a "family valuable" of greater importance than knives and forks?

That remark did not make the little girl feel valued. I am sure her parents would have protested that they greatly valued their daughter. The point I am making is that we can all say we value something or someone. But sometimes the things or people we value most are taken for granted.

Jesus is telling us today that the kingdom of God and living in God's good grace is of the highest value to us. Going to Mass, prayer, keeping the Commandments, loving God and each other is not just a form of insurance that we will be happy in the next life. It is something that we make part of our lives. The man who found the treasure was lucky, but the treasure wasn't legally and fully his until he sacrificed his possessions in order to buy the field. The man who wanted the pearl had to do the same. The kingdom of heaven doesn't come automatically. We have to invest in it to really possess it, or rather I should say, to have it possess us. The most important

thing we have to invest is our time, time to pray and to reflect on the Scriptures, perhaps even to serve God or the Church with some of our gifts and talents. But it also requires an investment of our will, choosing to guide our lives by Christ's teachings rather than making up our own rules about what's good or bad. It even takes an investment of our finances, since if we value our faith, we will adequately support it.

When this life is over, we will have to leave behind most of our treasures. But we will take with us our good works and our love for God and others; these will be our joy for all eternity. A life of holiness and goodness is a treasure that will not fail. Amen.