

Feast of the Assumption

August 15, 2008

INTRODUCTION ON THE FEAST (Rev. 11, 19a; 12, 1-6a, 10ab; I Cor. 15, 20-27; Lk. 1, 39-56)

The book of Revelation is highly symbolic. Some of the symbolism is quite obvious while it requires a fairly extensive knowledge of Scripture to interpret some of the other symbols. In today's first reading we hear about a woman, a child and a dragon. The dragon is the devil and the powers of evil at work in the world. The child is Christ. The woman in our reading has a double symbolism. She stands for Mary, the physical mother of Jesus Christ, and she stands for the Church, our spiritual mother who brings Jesus Christ to birth in us through faith and the sacraments. In today's passage the woman is rescued from the powers of the dragon and is described in great glory. This too has a double symbolism. It symbolizes the glory of Mary in the assumption. It also symbolizes God's faithful people whom he will rescue from evil and will bring, in the resurrection from the dead, into the glory of heaven.

HOMILY

Today's feast tells us that there is more to life than what we know and see right now. The feast is about Mary, but it's about us too, God's plan to raise us to new life to share with God eternal happiness. Mary gets to enjoy this privilege first after Jesus himself.

It is recorded nowhere in Scripture when, where or how Mary died. Nor do the Scriptures tell us about her assumption. It has been a part, however, of the very ancient tradition of the Church that Mary was assumed bodily into heavenly glory when her life here on earth was ended. One example comes from 450 in an early document where St. Juvenal, the Bishop of Jerusalem was asked by the emperor of Constantinople to bring the body of Mary to Constantinople. He replied to the emperor that Mary had died in the presence of all the apostles. But her tomb, when opened upon the request of St. Thomas, was found empty. Thus the apostles concluded that her body was taken up to heaven as Jesus was.

Some people belittle tradition as if it were unimportant. They claim to believe only the written words of the Scriptures. Yet, if we stop and think about it, we would have no Scriptures without tradition for the Scriptures came from the Church's tradition. For example, the earliest New Testament writings we have are the letters of Paul, the first of which was written about the year 51 A.D. Of our four gospels, Mark's is the first and it was written about 70 A.D. I say this so you can see the importance of tradition. The Church had only its tradition to go on until Paul and the evangelists started writing 20, 30, 40 years after Christ, at the earliest. So to say that the knowledge of the assumption of Mary came from the very early tradition of the Church is to give a lot of weight to this teaching. But to eliminate any question as to whether Mary actually was assumed into heavenly glory, the Holy Father, Pope Pius XII, after reviewing the belief of the Church through the ages, made it a dogma of our faith in 1950.

In today's gospel St. Luke tells us about Mary who is a young girl going to visit her much older cousin Elizabeth. Mary had just been visited by the angel, and she had accepted the invitation

to be the mother of the Savior God was sending to his people. So she is at this moment unmarried and yet pregnant through the power of the Holy Spirit. It was not a happy situation to be in. She could have been rejected by her husband to be, she could have been rejected by her family or could even have been put to death. Yet she is full of trust in God and praises God's greatness and God's goodness. There is no expression of "poor me." She is entirely focused on God. Mary shows us how to be trusting and in her assumption she shows us where that trust will lead us.

Today's feast honors Mary, for God himself has honored her. In her openness to God and in her willingness to always do whatever God wanted, God rewarded her in a unique way. But today's feast also is a source of hope for us. Christ came, as he tells us in St. John's gospel, that we might have the fullness of life. Our bodies too will share in that fullness as the Scriptures tell us so clearly. So Mary is allowed to enjoy ahead of time what God's plan is for all of us who are faithful in following him and serving him.

20th Sunday in Ordinary Time

August 17, 2008

INTRODUCTION:

The theme for today's liturgy is expressed in the psalm refrain: "O God, let all the nations praise you."

In order to prepare ourselves for today's first reading, I would like you to picture yourself as an observant Jew living in Jerusalem about 500 years before Christ. The temple was an important part of your faith and you could go there regularly for prayers and sacrifice. No one entered the temple except the priests when they made the daily offerings. The temple was God's house. Other men could pray in the area closest to the priests' court. The next area was the court for the women and, lastly, there was the court of the Gentiles. Those who were non-Jews were forbidden by death to go beyond the court of the Gentiles when approaching the temple. We heard Isaiah proclaim in today's first reading that foreigners (non-Jews) who kept the Sabbath and held to God's covenant would be welcome in the temple and could even offer sacrifices. God's house would be a house of prayer for all people and faith in God would be a saving grace for all people. That was as radical as a person could get at any time in Jewish history, especially 500 years before Christ.

It was even radical at the time of Jesus. When his followers started preaching the gospel to the Gentiles, they said the Gentiles, provided they followed Christ faithfully, were on equal footing with the Chosen People when it came to God's saving mercy and love.

In the second reading, from Paul's letter to the Romans, Paul laments the fact that the chosen people, by and large, have rejected Jesus as their Messiah and Savior. He sees great blessings

coming upon the world if and when they ever do accept Christ.

HOMILY

O God, let all the nations praise you. Once a radical concept, but through the gospels it has been clearly shown that this is God's desire that all people be united in his love. What a wonderful world we would enjoy if this were to be.

Today's story about the Canaanite woman reflects both the fact that Jesus came to save all people and, at the same time, it reflects the tension that this idea created. Jesus did not respond when she made her request, and the apostles asked Jesus to get rid of her. She was becoming a nuisance. "Send her away," they said. It doesn't sound like the Jesus we usually hear about. Jesus' answer reflected the theology that the Jews were, after all, God's Chosen People, but he left her with an opening to argue her case further. In a demonstration of unwavering faith she responded with such cleverness and humility that Jesus could not refuse.

It's difficult to understand what was going on here. This is the only time in the gospels that Jesus turned away from anyone. He helped everyone, even pagans. Why was he resistant to helping this woman? First of all, Jesus was going into pagan territory, not so he could preach, but so that he and the apostles could get some rest. From St. Mark we learn that he didn't want anyone to know he was there. Secondly, he had previously told his apostles that their mission was to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, and when a person has a big job to do they have to stay focused. I feel there is more to the story, though, and this might be the piece of the puzzle I've been looking for. I came across an interesting study of the social and political dynamics of that region in the first century. Again we learn from what Mark tells us in his gospel that this woman would have been among the privileged, upper class, culturally Greek members of that region. She represented a class of people who were oppressing and exploiting poor Jewish farmers in Galilee at the time. It would not have been out of character for Jesus to reserve his ministry for the oppressed and to refuse the requests of those who exploited them. This may have been part of the story, but the gospels ignored that part because they were more interested in showing that Jesus could reach beyond the religious boundaries of the Jewish religion to bring salvation to those who were outside. Once more Mark's version is helpful for he quotes Jesus as saying, "let the children first be fed, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." This implies there would be a time when the other nations (the meaning of Gentiles) would be fed.

One last detail often bothers people in that Jesus refers to the Gentiles as "dogs." It sounds insulting and is unlike Jesus. Of course, Jesus was not one to avoid harsh criticism when it was warranted, but the Greek word here is not quite so harsh. It really means a little dog, a puppy or a pet, not a mangy cur that the word "dog" might make us think of. We're not even sure if the word was insulting in that culture. We ourselves use phrases that compare people with animals that are sometimes complimentary rather than insulting, such "he is a handsome dog," or "on the tennis court he's a tiger," or "she's a real chick."

One really valuable lesson we can take from hearing today's gospel is that Christ reaches out to

all people in love, even those we don't think are worthy of his love. But there are a couple of other lessons we can take with us as well. Today's gospel is a good example of faith and perseverance in prayer. It also strikes me as a good example of asking others, including Jesus' good friends whom we call saints, to pray for us. Notice the woman tried to get the apostles to persuade Jesus for help and it worked. We don't understand the dynamics of prayer, but Jesus said there is great power in united prayer. And so we pray together the greatest prayer God gave us, the Eucharist. Amen.

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time – A Cycle

August 24, 2008

INTRODUCTION - Shebna was a powerful man in the court of King Hezekiah in Judah, 700 years before Christ. Next to the king, he had the most powerful position in the kingdom. Shebna's power went to his head and he used his position to exploit the poor and the innocent in order to make himself exorbitantly rich. God said through Isaiah that Shebna needed to be replaced by a person with integrity. The only reason this passage was selected for today's reading was because of the reference to the key of the House of David. Keys are symbols of authority. In our gospel Jesus promises he would give Peter the keys to the kingdom of heaven.

HOMILY – I want to make a point about something I saw in the Enquirer this past week, then I want to reflect on two important ideas in today's gospel.

There was a brief news clip in Thursday's paper about a hacker who broke into the telephone system of FEMA last weekend and racked up about \$12,000 in long distance phone calls to the Middle East and Asia. FEMA is part of Homeland Security. I didn't feel real secure after reading that! If this isn't a good incentive for people to pray for our country and our world, I don't know what is. Psalm 127 says: "If the Lord does not build the house, in vain do its builders labor; if the Lord does not watch over the city, in vain does the watchman keep vigil." We live in a society that keeps us so busy that often prayer is relegated to "something I'll do when I have the time." We are constantly being told our government is doing a great job of protecting us and I can only assume they are doing the best they can, but can we depend totally on the government? When was the last time we actually asked God to help our country. You might say a hacker breaking into a department of Homeland Security phone system and charging \$12,000 in long distance phone calls is just a small thing, and maybe it is, but wars have been won and lost over seemingly small things. I say all this, not with the intent of frightening people, but with the intent of reminding all of us we need to constantly pray. "If the Lord does not watch over the city, in vain does the watchman keep vigil."

Now I want to reflect on two important ideas in today's gospel. First of all there are many places in the Scriptures that emphasize the preeminent position of Peter among the apostles, but there are two places where Peter's position of leadership is spelled out more clearly than anywhere

else. The one is in St. John where Jesus tells Peter after the resurrection: "Feed my lambs, feed my sheep." Also in Scripture where Peter's position of importance is clearly emphasized is in today's gospel. Such insistence on the position of Peter vis-à-vis the other apostles is what underlies our belief that after Christ, the Holy Father is chief shepherd and head of the Church. His role is to be the visible representative of Christ. This doesn't mean he has perfectly represented Christ at all times in history, but that is still the position he holds. He has the final word on any issue relating to the Church. The keys Jesus said he would give Peter symbolize this authority. The keys Jesus gave Peter were not buried with him and that position of authority did not end when Peter died. It was passed on to his successors. This is implied in the gospel Matthew wrote, for Peter had been dead for at least 25 or 30 years when Matthew wrote this passage. Matthew made a big issue of this incident, not to tell us about some personal favor Jesus bestowed on Peter, but because the leadership position of Peter would remain as part of the structure of Christ's community of believers.

A second important idea in today's gospel is the answer to the question Jesus asked his apostles: "Who do you say that I am?" How we answer this question will determine how each of us relates to him. Is he, for example, someone worth our time on Sunday or even during the week? Is he someone we can trust? Is he someone who loves us, forgives us, wants only the best for us? Is he someone who has the authority to tell us how to live, what we should do, what we may not do? Is he someone we look forward to spending eternity with?

Can any of us give a complete and perfect answer to that question "Who do you say that I am?" In one way or another, each week I try to help you have a better sense of how to answer this question, even as I try to answer it for myself. It's easy to say Jesus is savior, Jesus is messiah, Jesus is Son of God, or as we say in the creed each week: Jesus is "God from God, light from light, true God from true God, etc." But has our mind and heart connected with these words to the extent that we can exclaim with Paul: "Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! ... For from him and through him and for him are all things." The apostles could tell Jesus what others said about him, and we can also say what others have said about Jesus. That's okay, for that's how we begin to learn who Jesus is, by what others tell us. But have we moved beyond what others have told us to know Jesus in a personal way, a way that Jesus could say has not been revealed to us by "flesh and blood, but by the Heavenly Father?" If we do not know Jesus personally, what can we do that will help us to know him, not just by hearsay, but in a deeply personal way? How we do it is how we get to know anyone in a personal way. By spending time with a person. There are no shortcuts. Spending time with God, with Jesus, is called prayer. That's what we are about now. Amen.

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

August 31, 2008

INTRODUCTION: (Jeremiah 20, 7-9) Our first reading from the prophet Jeremiah goes back to

600 B.C. It sounds as if Jeremiah expected people would be grateful to him for speaking God's word to them. But they only hated him for it. The people ridiculed him, threw him in jail and even tried to kill him by throwing him in a well. We hear him complaining to God, "You duped me! You tricked me, God!"

Jesus' faithfulness to his mission would bring him suffering too, but Jesus did not feel tricked. He was well aware of what was going to happen. In today's gospel, we hear him warning his disciples ahead of time.

HOMILY: (Matthew 16, 21-27) You can't turn on the TV these days without hearing about politics. Will Rogers told a story you might enjoy that was about two politicians. One said to the other: "I'll stop telling lies about you, if you'll stop telling the truth about me."

Jesus would have made a lousy politician. Politicians are busy telling us how they are going to solve all our problems if we vote for them. Jesus is telling us if we follow him it's going to bring us problems. "Whoever wishes to come after me must take up his cross and follow me." Let us not assume from this statement that if we decide not to follow him, we'll be without any problems. Having problems comes with being human. Problems and crosses are part of everyone's life, whether they believe in Christ or not. Following Christ helps us deal with them more easily; the cross that we take up if we follow Christ will not defeat us but will bring us to resurrection.

Religion and philosophy have always tried to understand the mystery of suffering, especially the difficult problem of why good people suffer. So many ways to explain suffering are out there. None of them can take away all the mystery from suffering. For me, the best answer is found in the gospel. Jesus, through his cross and resurrection, has given us hope in our pain and hopelessness and has assured us that if we follow him in faith, that can only lead to eternal glory.

Peter had faith in Jesus as we heard in last week's gospel. He had just finished professing that Jesus was "the Messiah, the Son of the living God." The words were hardly out of his mouth when Jesus said that being faithful to his mission, that being the Messiah, would cost him his life, but he would rise again. That didn't match Peter's idea of the Messiah. In Peter's mind the Messiah would rally the Jewish people, he would defeat the Romans who occupied their land, he would bring back the days when Israel had their own king. That the Messiah would have to suffer was just not in the plan according to Peter. He was pretty bold telling Jesus "that's not going to happen to you. You're our savior. How can you save us by suffering? Ridiculous!" Jesus scolded Peter whom he had just praised for his faith and called him Satan. He was not saying Peter was evil. He was telling Peter he was doing Satan's job of being a tempter, trying to convince Jesus that being faithful to his mission would be a piece of cake. Jesus knew history better than Peter. He knew what the prophets before him went through – people like Jeremiah or Jesus' cousin John the Baptist, who was put to death by Herod. He could see things more clearly than Peter. Jesus told him "you have a lot to learn. You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do."

We might wonder how Peter was expected to think like anything other than a human being. After all that's what he was. Peter wasn't the Son of God. But there was a way, and there is a way for us to think like God does; that is, to learn from God, to listen to him, to believe what he tells us. It's the way of prayer and faith. Basically that's no different than learning from any great teacher. When we learn from a great teacher, we absorb their thoughts, their insights, their perspective, their truth. We begin to think like them. When God tells us something and we listen and we believe it, we're seeing and knowing as God sees and knows, even if we can't fully understand everything at the time. We're beginning to think like God does. Peter's problem was he stopped listening to Jesus when Jesus started talking about suffering and he started to dictate to Jesus the way things were going to be. That's when he got into trouble.

We've been called to a life of prayer and faith. For us today, with freedom of religion, it is not as challenging for us to live that life as it was for those who followed Christ in the earliest days of the Church. People really did lose their lives and their fortunes for being Christians. We are blessed that we do not have to make the kind of life or death choice Christians did way back then. If we feel fortunate about it, shouldn't we be willing to share our faith with others? One good way to do that would be to invite them to come to church with you or to come to our RCIA program which begins this Wednesday.

Coming to Mass, as we are doing now, teaches us to think as God does. We listen to what God speaks to us in the Scriptures. We profess our faith in his word. As we struggle with our own crosses and difficulties, we celebrate how Jesus overcame his sufferings and his cross through the resurrection. In that event we are given a vision of God's plan of victory for all who live in his grace. Amen.