

Fourth Sunday Ordinary Time

February 1, 2009

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

If you are married, our second reading from Paul's letter to the Corinthians might be difficult for you to understand. So I would like to give a little background to today's second reading. The passage comes from a section of the letter where Paul is answering one of several questions he received in a letter from the Corinthians. This question is about marriage. Somehow the Corinthians decided marriage was not a holy thing and it would be better to live a life of celibacy. In Paul's answer he first affirmed the value of marriage. However, though he stressed it is not for everyone, he also wanted to affirm the value of celibacy. In today's passage he is addressing those who were not yet married or who were widowed and points out the advantages of remaining in such a state. The early Church, including Paul, thought Jesus was going to return very soon and the world would come to an end. To quote Paul, he said, "time is short" and "the world as we know it is passing away." If it sounds as if Paul is overemphasizing the spiritual advantages of celibacy, consider how you might view things in your life if you thought that in a very short time the world would end and Jesus' return was immanent. Your priorities would probably change considerably.

Now let me shift back to today's first reading. Moses and God's people had finally arrived at the Promised Land after several generations of slavery in Egypt and a long journey through the desert. Moses knew that God was calling him to leave this world and God's people would cross the Jordan and enter the Promised Land without him. Basically he is saying "goodbye and good luck." 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: Moses promised, "A prophet like me will the Lord, your God raise up for you from your own kin; to him shall you listen." God did raise up many prophets but none could compare with Jesus. Jesus spoke God's word as Moses said he would, but Jesus was even more than someone who spoke God's word, he was God's Son. When Moses said "to him shall you listen," he was not foretelling the future, on the contrary, he was telling God's people what they should do. Often they refused to listen. In this way Jesus experienced the same fate as the other prophets.

From the beginning of Mark's gospel, St. 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." Within a few verses we hear the testimony of John the Baptist that Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit. A few verses later Mark tells us that at Jesus' baptism a voice came from the heavens saying to Jesus: "You are my beloved Son. With you I am well pleased." Now, not yet even

halfway through Mark's first chapter, he gives us more information about Jesus, but from an unexpected source, the devil. The people in the synagogue recognize the power in Jesus' teaching and that he is a prophet; that is, he speaks the word of God with a freshness and a power they had never seen before. But the devil is no dummy. The devil catches on immediately. The devil cries out from the person who is possessed: "I know who you are – the Holy One of God." The devil is not only perceptive and clever but would remember everything. The devil would remember the announcement of the angels to the shepherds when Jesus was born: "Today in the city of David a savior has been born for you who is Christ and Lord." The devil would have remembered the visit of the magi when Jesus was born. This is the first miracle St. Mark tells us about. 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. Let me conclude with two ideas:

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, as Moses said, we shall listen to him. (Not that we always do, but it's what we should do. That's one of the reasons why we come to Mass on Sunday. The whole first part of the Mass focuses on hearing the 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. Some sicknesses such as epilepsy or mental illnesses had been attributed to the devil in past centuries. We now believe they have other causes. In my experience as a priest and counselor, I definitely 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. I am convinced the devil never takes a vacation or a day off. The devil doesn't even need to sleep at night. Mostly I believe the devil is at work, and we don't even know he's there. He helps us in our weaknesses to make the wrong choices. For example, if we're envious, the devil gives us suggestions to help us give in to that trait, and the same with other weaknesses, such as hatred, out of control anger, laziness, pride, lust, greed, gluttony, etc. But there is one stronger than the devil and who can help us if we listen to him. Amen.

Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

February 8, 2009

INTRODUCTION: (Job 7,1-4.6-7; I Cor 9,16-19.22-23; Mark 1,29-39) Today in our first reading we hear Job lamenting his sufferings. Depression really is evident when Job says, "I shall not see happiness again." Hopelessness is one of the major characteristics of depression. Whether Job was a real person or not, no one can say for sure, but the Book of Job definitely expresses

a feeling we've all felt at times, that life is unfair. At the time this book was written, the view God's people had was that if we are good, all will go well, and if we're not, all kinds of terrible things will happen to us. We all know life doesn't always work that way. The book of Job probes this problem without coming to a satisfactory answer. The author could only conclude God somehow must know what he's doing because we do not. However, even though Job despaired of ever being happy, his misfortunes were reversed in the end and he did die happy.

Our second reading is difficult to understand without knowing the context. Paul is not usually given to boasting, but here he is using himself to inspire the Corinthians to follow his example. The situation at Corinth he is addressing concerned eating meat sacrificed to idols. There were those who thought there was no problem because idols were not really gods anyway. However, this created scandal for other Christians and it was a source of division. Paul said, the first group are theologically correct, but they should forego the right to eat meat sacrificed to idols for the sake of love for their brothers and sisters who did not understand and for the sake of unity. Then he speaks of himself, which we will hear, saying he has given up certain rights he could claim, including the right to be paid for his work, so that he could win more people to the gospel of Christ.

HOMILY: Our gospel tells us about Jesus who was kept busy trying to cure the ills of the world. Notice how important prayer was to him. He needed to gain strength from his Heavenly Father, as we all do, in order to deal with everyday challenges.

I would like to focus on Paul today because I think the second reading connects with certain issues in the Church today. One of the major problems Paul had to deal with in the Corinthian community was trying to keep everyone in union with one another and with Christ. Not only did this problem show itself in the issue of eating meat sacrificed to idols, but unity was threatened when those blessed by various gifts of the Spirit were thinking they were better than everyone else. There were problems with the celebration of the Eucharist. They celebrated in the context of a meal and those well off ate well while the poor didn't have enough to eat. So Paul said: do your eating and drinking at home and not when you gather for the Eucharist. There were other issues too, but especially one stood out. There was a man living in sin with his father's wife. It was so offensive not even pagans would do something like that. Paul said he should be put out of the community until he came to his senses – to be excommunicated. It was a punishment meant to lead him to repentance.

The Church, as any society, has the authority to decide who has gone too far and is no longer a part of the community. This week there was a lot about excommunication in the news. About 25 years ago an Archbishop in France, Archbishop Lefebvre, decided he didn't like all the changes in the Church and started his own Church which is called the Society of St. Pius X. He wouldn't claim he was starting his own Church. He would say the Pope and Bishops and people who changed with Vatican II were all wrong, and he was right, that he was the authentic Roman Catholic. He started ordaining priests who agreed with him and, eventually, after he ignored Pope John Paul II's order to stop, he was excommunicated. In addition, Church Law, also called Canon Law, states if anyone is ordained bishop without the consent of the Holy Father, that

person is automatically excommunicated. Four such bishops in the Society of St. Pius X were in this situation and they have repeatedly requested that the excommunication be removed. In his effort to reunite the Archbishop Lefebvre group with the Church, the Holy Father lifted the excommunication on January 21, (two and one half weeks ago.) This does not mean the Society of St. Pius X is now part of the Roman Catholic Church. It only means the penalty has been lifted on these four bishops, but there is a lot that needs to be done before there is full unity. The followers of Archbishop Lefebvre must fully recognize the validity of Vatican II and the Magisterium of the Holy Father.

To complicate things, on the same day the excommunication was lifted, there was a TV interview with one of those bishops, Bishop Williamson, where he denied the Holocaust ever took place. The pope has denounced the position of that bishop and so has the head of the Lefebvre group. Several people have asked me this week how the Holy Father could remove the excommunication from someone who denied the Holocaust. I have tried to make it clear that the excommunication imposed upon the bishops and the lifting of the excommunication was totally unrelated to Bishop Williamson's position on the Holocaust. First of all, the Holy Father did not know Bishop Williamson's position on the Holocaust when he removed the excommunication. Secondly, a person is not excommunicated for saying something so profoundly ignorant. If a person were to remain adamant in that ignorance and were ordered to recant, and they persisted, they could perhaps be excommunicated. I don't know if that could happen here; however, the Holy Father has subsequently demanded that "Bishop Williamson must absolutely, unequivocally and publicly distance himself from his views concerning the Shoah" (the Holocaust) before he could ever be fully united with the Catholic Church as a bishop. As we can see, unity is not easy to achieve. If it were easy, there would not be hundreds of Christian denominations in existence today. The Holy Father asks our prayers for the Church and for himself. Amen.