

5th Sunday in Ordinary Time - A Cycle

February 6, 2011

INTRODUCTION - (Isaiah 58,7-10; I Corinthians 2,1-5; Matthew 5,13-16)

I speak of the Babylonian exile frequently because it was such an important part of Israel's history and because so many of the Old Testament writings were recorded shortly before or after that event. The people who survived the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem and the territory around Jerusalem were in exile for 50 years until the Persians conquered the Babylonians and allowed God's people to return home. Most of those Jews who returned to Israel were the grandchildren of the ones who were taken into exile. When they got home to Israel, they found their cities and farms in a worse state than they were 50 years earlier after the Babylonians had conquered them. They had to rebuild everything, their farms, their homes, their businesses, their cities, their temple. Here is where our first reading comes in. Their efforts to survive created deep division in the community. It was survival of the fittest, and the poor and homeless were ignored. God is telling them that their selfish, self-centered, 'every man for himself' attitude was not going to be successful. If they wanted to grow and thrive, they had to start caring about each other. Justice, fairness, honesty and kindness would bring light into their darkness. Selfishness would bring continued suffering.

HOMILY

One Sunday the preacher's sermon went on endlessly. A man got up and walked out of the church. He came back near the end of the service. The pastor made an effort to greet him as the people were leaving church and said, "Clarence, I noticed you left during my sermon and then came back later. Are you feeling okay?" "Sure," Clarence said. "I'm okay. I just went out to get a haircut." "Why didn't you do that before you came to church?" The pastor asked. Clarence replied, "I didn't need it then." (The Joyful Noiseletter, Aug.-Sept. 2010, pg 2)

I'll bet few ever got up to leave while Jesus was speaking. He even had to work a miracle to feed the crowd because their day with Jesus lasted so long. Today's gospel from St. Matthew is a continuation of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount.

Some scripture passages could keep me talking for an hour and I struggle to keep my remarks within a reasonable timeframe. In today's readings the message is so clear that it is hardly necessary to say anything more about it, but a couple of points deserve a comment. As the Sermon on the Mount continues, Jesus tells us "you are the salt of the earth? you are the light of the world." He wasn't just talking to his 12 apostles but to a large crowd. That includes us for the Scriptures are meant to teach us as well as those for whom they were originally written.

Jesus tells us we are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. To be light for the world is an obvious compliment for light is so important to us. Try to imagine a world in darkness. I wouldn't want to live in such a world. Even during these winter days when the days are short and it's cloudy and gloomy, some people are seriously affected. The condition is called S.A.D. (seasonal affective disorder) and people who suffer from it become very depressed. To be

called the "Salt of the earth" is also a high compliment, although today we are told to avoid the stuff as much as possible. At the time of Jesus, it was a very important commodity, primarily because it was a preservative. Without salt, food would spoil.

In praising us Jesus is also challenging us. In praising us he's telling us we have talents and gifts that could be of great value and help to others, talents and gifts we often do not give ourselves credit for. He also challenges us to be the gift to others that we can be. Our first reading from Isaiah describes how we can be light and salt for the world. Sometimes we are called to do big things to help others and sometimes it's the little day-to-day acts of kindness that are significant and important. Sometimes just giving another person a smile is all we need to do (and maybe the hardest thing for us to do).

Whatever we do to help another is going to bring blessings back to us. I'm sure we've all experienced that. I'd like to end with a quote from Patch Adams, a Doctor about whom a movie was made several years ago. He is also a doctor who likes to play the clown and bring humor into his healing work. He said "hugely important is the way a person expresses thanks for being alive. The person who does so through service will possess a great comfort throughout life."

We ask the Lord to bless us today as we come before him who is the source of all light, all wisdom and all blessings. Amen.

6th Sunday in Ordinary Time - A Cycle

February 13, 2011

INTRODUCTION: (Sirach 15,15-20; I Corinthians 2,6-10; Matthew 5,17-37) About a month ago I had to get a new computer. All my programs needed to be updated and it has been a challenge getting familiar with new technology. Sometimes my computer seems to have a mind of its own, but I know it really doesn't. I just need to get to know what I'm supposed to do and not supposed to do to get it to work like I want it to. Life's like that too. According to the first book of the Bible, the Book of Genesis, when God created human beings he gave us instructions about what we could and could not do, and his instructions weren't all that complicated. But, according to Genesis, our first parents thought they were smarter than God and decided to make up their own rules. They found out that was a disaster. Our first reading today, from Ben Sirach, is a reflection on sin and our freedom to choose right or wrong. Some of the philosophers of Ben Sirach's time (about 180 years before Christ) were teaching that "when I sin it's God who makes me do it." The author tells us that's not so. We have a free will and are able to choose right from wrong.

HOMILY: A young man was pouring over the selection of Valentine's Day cards at a local gift shop. The clerk asked if she could help. "I'm looking for your most beautiful Valentine card," he explained. "Something that expresses my deepest feelings." The clerk went to a section of

cards and pulled out one that was beautifully embossed, trimmed with lace, and written in an elegant script. "This is a lovely card," she said and read the inside. "To my one true love, the light of my life, the joy of my heart, the very essence of beauty and grace. I love you more than I can say." The young man was thrilled. "That's perfect!" He said. "That's exactly what I'm looking for. I'll take five." (from www.ConnectionsMediaWorks.com: Feb. 2011, pg. 2)

We are full of contradictions and sometimes we really make a fool of ourselves. Sometimes things are humorous and sometimes they can get us into big trouble. As we know, the scribes and Pharisees of Jesus' day were often full of contradictions and self-deceit, convinced they were the truly holy ones and everyone else were great sinners. Jesus tells us if we want to enter the kingdom of God, we have to be better than they were. This week and next he gives us various illustrations of what he means by being better. Basically, he is trying to show us holiness goes beyond external behavior. Holiness must be deep inside of us - that which must be deep inside of us, that which makes us truly holy is love: love for God and love for each other.

Please don't misunderstand me. Certainly the way we behave is important. God's commandments tell us that. Thou shalt not kill, thou shalt not commit adultery, thou shalt not bear false witness, honor thy father and thy mother, keep holy the Lord's day, etc. We might feel like killing someone, but we don't do it. Keeping God's instructions about what we must do or not do will guide us to a better life. Jesus wants us also to have such love in our hearts that we not only do not kill others, but that we love them enough that we don't want to kill them; that we not only don't take our neighbor's wife, but that we love our neighbor and our own spouse, if we're married, to the extent that we don't even desire intimate relations with someone we're not married to. With technology and pornography it's really easy to fall into that trap today. He tells us also that not only should we not swear falsely, our love and respect for others should move us to always be truthful to anyone to whom we speak.

We might be thinking "that's a big order." Truly it is. Jesus asks a lot from his followers. Sirach tells us in the first reading, "if you choose, you can keep the commandments." We must add "only with God's help," for God is love and only with his help, a help that is available to us through prayer and the sacraments, can we be like him. As Jesus said, "without me you can do nothing."

We must be careful not to condemn ourselves when feelings come to us, feelings of anger, laziness, envy, lust, greed, pride or whatever. We are all human and we all experience those feelings. We would have to cut out our brain to eliminate feelings such as these. The important thing is, what do we do with these feelings, do we dwell on them, hold on to them, allow them to take over our thinking, or do we consider whether they fit with what Jesus would want of us and choose to go in the direction of what we know he would want.

This is a slightly different topic, but it's worth noting here the way Jesus taught. Jesus said "you have heard it was said?" When the ordinary Jew learned God's law, it was read to them or preached to them (since owning a book then was a luxury). Then Jesus said "but I say to you?" Jewish rabbi's never preached that way. Jesus is speaking here with great authority, an

authority seemingly equal to God who originally gave us the Ten Commandments. People have often asked me whether he knew he was God. Right from the beginning of his ministry, it is obvious he didn't have any hesitancy about acting as if he were.

Today at our Mass of the Four Chaplains, we celebrate God's love shown to us in Jesus who taught us to love and who showed us perfect love through his own sacrifice to save us. We also today honor four men of God whose hearts and lives were filled with God's love. Jesus said, "No one has greater love than this, that he lay down his life for his friends." (Jn. 15,13) Their sacrifice moves us beyond words and they remind us of the many men and women who also made great sacrifices for our safety and freedom, whose acts of love and service may never be known.

7th Sunday in Ordinary Time - A Cycle

February 20, 2011

INTRODUCTION: (Leviticus 19, 1-2.17-18; I Corinthians 3,16-23; Matthew 5,38-48) Our first reading is from Leviticus, the third book of the Bible. It has many laws about Old Testament priesthood and Temple sacrifices, but its central message is a call to holiness for all God's people. If you look up this portion of the book of Leviticus you will see that this call to holiness includes the Ten Commandments as well as a number of other commandments - all of which are summed up in the commandment to love one's neighbor as oneself. Jesus expands on this command in today's gospel, a continuation of his Sermon on the Mount.

HOMILY: Late one night, a truck driver pulled into a roadside café for a little something to eat. As he was eating, three nasty-looking motorcyclists noisily strutted in and made their way to the bar. For some unknown reason they gravitated toward the truck driver. One poured a little salt on his head, another knocked his pie on the floor and the third managed to knock the trucker's coffee off the counter and into the man's lap. The truck driver got up, said nothing, paid his bill and made his exit. "That dude sure wasn't much of a fighter" sneered one of the cyclists. The waiter peered out the window onto the dark parking lot and answered, "He's not much of a driver either. He just ran over three motorcycles." (Sunday Homily Helps, St. Anthony Messenger Press, for February 20, 2011)

It gives joy to our hearts to see nasty people get paid back for their nastiness. Jesus gives us a different way to look at things in today's gospel. In last week's portion of the Sermon on the Mount, we heard Jesus list several of the commandments with the phrase, "you have heard that it was said?" and then give us his interpretation of how we were to observe them with the words, "but I say to you..." Today's gospel continues this pattern with two other commandments: the first is the law of talion, "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." The second is the law about love of neighbor.

Let's look briefly at each of these two commandments in today's gospel. The law of talion

regards proportionate recompense. It is a very ancient principle shared by all civilized people. It is a principle on which we supposedly base our own legal system in that if someone harms you, any restitution must be proportionate to the harm done. When Jesus tells us not to resist one who is evil, he is not addressing those who have responsibility to keep order in society such as law enforcement officers and judges. Their job is to vindicate the rights of the injured. Without someone to keep order in society, there would only be chaos. Jesus is addressing the injured person himself or herself. He is not expressing it as a hard and fast rule that we have to allow ourselves to let other people walk all over us. Remember when Jesus was arrested and put on trial. When someone struck him on the cheek, he didn't turn the other cheek. He didn't retaliate either. He responded, "why did you strike me?" We are entitled to stand up for ourselves, but Jesus wants us to let love guide us rather than vengeance. If in society we always exact retribution every time we are injured or offended, we would all be going around blind and toothless as the Rev. Martin Luther King said. If all of us had to get even for every hurt in life, we would all end up hating one another. Sometimes we have to swallow our pride and move on.

Regarding the second commandment, we've all heard sermons about loving our neighbor as ourselves. This may be part of the greatest commandment but it's also one of the most difficult. There is one thing Jesus said in his comments about this command that I think is extremely practical and useful: Jesus said, "pray for those who persecute you." Some years ago someone hurt our family very badly. Whenever I thought about that person, I could feel my blood pressure go up and anger raging inside of me. One day when I was feeling very angry, these words of Jesus came to me and once they did, whenever I thought of that person, I said a little prayer for the individual. It got rid of all my anger and bitterness. I must confess that doesn't make me perfect. If that person showed up at the rectory wanting to borrow a few hundred dollars, I don't know if I would give it to them (if I had it) - I'm not that far along the road to holiness, but at least my heart is free of anger. There is a lot of benefit in forgiving. Now, when someone tells me that someone is driving them crazy or they are having difficulty forgiving, I say to them, "Jesus says pray for those who persecute you." It will bring you a lot of peace and might even surprise you by helping the other person show more kindness. Amen.

8th Sunday in Ordinary Time - A Cycle

February 27, 2011

INTRODUCTION: (Isaiah 49,14-15; I Corinthians 4,1-5; Matthew 6,24-34) The Jews certainly thought God had forgotten them after 50 years of exile in Babylon. But God tells them he hasn't forgotten. The prophet records what God spoke: "Comfort, give comfort to my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and say to her that her service is at an end, (i.e. the exile is over), her guilt is expiated." (Isaiah 40,1-2) God goes on to tell his people he has written their name on the palm of his hand - an image expressing his continual remembrance of his people. Our very short first reading today is one of the most tender expressions in the Old Testament of God's love for God's people.

HOMILY: Murphy and his buddies were out playing cards one evening and Murphy was soon down \$500. After he lost an additional \$500 in the next hand, he grabbed his chest and fell over dead. His buddies didn't know what to do, but they knew they had to tell his wife. Sullivan was chosen to tell Murphy's wife. The other guys told him he had to be very gentle, not to shock her and to break it to her easily. He assured them he would be the essence of tactfulness. So he went to the house, knocked on the door and when Mrs. Murphy answered he told her, "Your husband just lost \$1000 in a poker game and he is afraid to come home." She replied, "Tell him to drop dead." Sullivan said, "I'll be sure and do that Mrs. Murphy."

Jesus reminds us today in the gospel that we are not in control of that moment when we have to leave this world. Modern medicine may give us a little more time, but we can't avoid the inevitable. He asks us: "Can any of you by worrying add a single moment to your life-span?"

As we continue listening to the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus reminds us that entering the kingdom of heaven is more important than everything else in our lives. In a variety of ways this theme runs all through the Sermon on the Mount. In each part of the Sermon, Jesus tells us something we need to know in order to enter into the heavenly kingdom. Today's passage focuses on our everyday needs and worries.

The people Jesus was speaking to had more basic needs and worries than most of us have. Most of them were just trying to survive. Many people are just trying to survive today too, but most of us have our basic material needs met and so we worry about other things like safety and security, our loved ones, politics, health, the price of gas, whether I should get a new cell phone, worrying whether my nose is too big, keeping up with the Jones', etc. As important as some of our concerns are, God's kingdom is more important. Jesus tells us, "Put God first and have more trust in God."

We must not distort his message like the boy who wrote home from college: "Dear Mom and Dad, today's gospel reading was all about not worrying over things like food and clothing because God is going to give them to us anyway, and it takes our minds away from what really matters. That gave me a whole new perspective. From now on, I'm not going to worry about getting good grades, finding a job, etc. God knows that I need them and God will come through. Your loving son. P.S. In case God is slow getting around to me, I need \$800. (from Preaching Resource, CelebrationPublications.org, Feb 27, 2011, pg 4)

God expects us to use our brains to deal with life and to provide for ourselves. There is a line in George Bernard Shaw's play Joan of Arc. Joan was discussing with her general whether she should go into battle with an army that vastly outnumbered her own. She said God would help her win. Her general told her, "God is no man's daily drudgery." The general as it turned out was right. Joan lost the battle. God is not going to do for us what we should do for ourselves. He's not going to do our laundry, pay our bills, cut our grass or plant our gardens. We have to do for ourselves what God gave us the power to do.

There are those times when we are not in control. That's when we must trust in God's love and care. If we don't trust, we can worry ourselves to death, but Jesus doesn't want us to do that. There is a line from St. Paul that is very helpful to me. He tells us, "for those who love God, all things work out for the best." (Rom 8, 28) Believing that brings me a lot of peace. Amen.