

Fourteenth Ordinary - A Cycle

July 3, 2011

INTRODUCTION - (Zechariah 9,9-10; Romans 8,9.11-13; Matthew 11,25-30) Two hundred thirty-five years ago, we declared our independence from the English. This was a courageous step on the part of our ancestors and it has been challenged in many ways through these years. Somehow we have managed to keep going, and with God's blessings, we will continue on. May we use our freedom with responsibility and may God bless our land.

Two hundred thirty-five years is a long time. When we hear from Zechariah in today's first reading, it had been three hundred years since the Jews had enjoyed freedom. First they were under the brutal exile of the Babylonians for 50 years until the Persians destroyed the Babylonian empire and allowed the Jews to return to their homes. Alexander the Great conquered the Persians and eventually, during this Hellenistic period, the Jews were bitterly persecuted. Scholars believe that it was during this period of Greek rule that Zechariah, as God's prophet, promises better days. He tells Jerusalem to rejoice for their king would come to bring them freedom and peace. Since kings were anointed, they were called in Hebrew "Messiah" and in Greek "Christos" which means "the anointed one." 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 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 fulfilled fully.

HOMILY - A man came home from a long day of counting ballots at the Board of Elections in his area. He said to his wife, "We won, dear. I'm now a state representative." Not sure she heard correctly, she said "Honestly!" He said in reply, "now don't bring anything up about honesty!"

Some of you may have heard this true story. It was at a graduation ceremony at the University of Maryland a few years ago. The graduates marched in with great solemnity. Parents were smiling and brushing away tears at the same time. The speakers appropriately stayed within the guidelines of political correctness and no one dared ask for divine blessings on the graduates or their families. The final speaker, one of the students, went to the podium, he stood there silently for a few moments then, without a cue, every one of the graduates sneezed. The student at the podium looked at the audience and said, "God bless you, each and every one of you." And he walked off the stage. The audience exploded into applause.

So, on this holiday weekend, I say God bless each and every one of you. We know our country is not perfect, nor are all its politicians, but it's the best country on the face of the earth. Just the fact that we are here today is one indication of that. In some countries our lives would be threatened or we would be put in jail just for doing what we're doing. Let us continue to work and pray that we might remain strong, able to stand on our own, and remain free - not to do just

anything we feel like, but free to serve God and to serve each other in love.

Friday was the feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. I mention that because the gospel for that feast is the same gospel we just heard today. "Come to me," Jesus said, "and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me for I am meek and humble of heart. ..."

The Sacred Heart is a special symbol of Jesus' love for us. We must not forget Jesus had (and has) a human heart just as we do. St. Paul said he became like us in all things except sin. He feels emotions of love, compassion and tenderness. Because when we love someone, we want to be loved back, he also feels it when we forget him, betray him, do what displeases him. Joined to that human heart is the infinite love of God. Thus when we see a statue or picture of the Sacred Heart, there are usually flames of fire coming from it representing the immense love of God. Because God is love, as St. John tells us, Jesus cannot not love, even when we refuse him our love. So he asks special people to offer him greater love to make up for the pain of what he suffered for us, the pain of rejected love. That is the meaning of the crown of thorns we see surrounding Jesus' heart. This is, in essence, the theme of devotion to the Sacred Heart: 1) recognizing Jesus love and 2) offering repentance for the love that we and others have failed to give him. This is the reason we have First Friday Mass and why we have holy hours. This is the reason ultimately for the Eucharist itself. There are many blessings Jesus promised to those who honor him as the Sacred Heart.

Jesus said, "come to me." "Come" is the word I want to stress here. He has already come to us, through his birth, his teachings and miracles, his death and resurrection, through grace and the sacraments. He has come as far as possible. Coming to him implies we have to move closer, we have more we have to learn from him. We have to take time to pray, to read the Scriptures, to forgive those who have hurt us, to be kind to others and all the other things we've been taught about living a life of holiness. Don't expect that Jesus is going to make us rich and take all our problems away. He did promise a cross to those who follow him. Life itself, however, has many crosses, whether we follow Jesus or not. It's a lot easier when we have Jesus as part of our everyday lives. "My yoke is easy and my burden light." "Come to me all you who labor and are burdened." Amen.

Fifteenth Ordinary - A Cycle

July 10, 2011

INTRODUCTION (Isaiah 55,10-11; Romans 8,18-23; Matthew 13,1-9 or 1-23) In today's first reading, the prophet had as his audience God's captive people in Babylon. God had been telling them, through the prophet, that after 50 years of captivity and slavery to the Babylonians, they would soon be able to return to Israel, to their cities, their homes and their farms. Many doubted this could be true. In today's passage God is assuring them his promise will be fulfilled. God compares his word to the rain and the snow. When God sends moisture to the earth, it does the work of keeping the world green and alive. When God sends out his word, it is not full of empty

promises, it is effective and powerful and is able to accomplish what it was sent to do. As we will hear in today's gospel parable, another way of thinking of the power of the word of God is to think of it as a seed.

HOMILY- A newly ordained priest was having a difficult time getting started preparing his first sermon. He asked his pastor for a suggestion and his pastor told him: "start with something that's certain to grab their attention. For example, you might say: 'some of the best years of my life were spent in the arms of a woman who was someone else's wife.'" The pastor smiled at the young priest's shocked expression, then added "She was my mother." That Sunday the nervous young priest ascended the pulpit, sweating and shaking. Finally he said "the pastor told me some of the best years of his life were spent in the arms of a woman who was someone else's wife." He was pleased in getting everyone's attention but his nervousness overtook him, his mind went blank and he just blurted out: "For the life of me, I can't remember if he said who she was." (Reader's Digest, Laughter, pg 285)

I thought that might be an appropriate start for today's parable about growth. As infants we all spent a lot of time in someone's arms, most probably our parents. But somehow we grew up, started walking, talking, going to school, then eventually driving, working, getting married perhaps and getting older. When we were young, we couldn't grow up fast enough; now time goes by too fast.

Counting this Sunday's parable, we're going to have three weeks of parables about God's kingdom (or as Matthew likes to call it: "the kingdom of heaven"). Actually today's parable is hardly a parable. A parable usually has an unexpected ending. Today's parable is entirely predictable. If we throw seed on the ground, some of it will grow if the climate is agreeable and there is enough sun and moisture. I used the short form of the parable because we've heard it so often and pretty much know how it is interpreted. If we were reading Matthew's gospel from beginning to end, we would see that today's gospel describes the various ways people had been responding to Jesus up to this point in his ministry. He was accused of being possessed, of being a breaker of divine law, and a blasphemer. Some people thought he was a great healer, and having made them well, they went happily on about their business and didn't think any more about him. Some enjoyed his stories and were entertained as long as he was willing to entertain them, but if he asked something difficult of them, they sought other kinds of entertainment. Then there were some who thought he had something worthwhile to say and they continued to listen to him and learn from him. Jesus was like the farmer sowing the seed. Although he didn't touch all hearts, those whose hearts he touched grew and produced good fruit; that is, their lives were virtuous and pleasing to God.

Jesus' message for us in today's parable is to know first of all that the kingdom of heaven is not an entitlement (as a lot of people these days assume it is). Just because the seed of grace has been planted in our hearts, if we do nothing with it, it will die. If it lives in us, it will grow. We know that some of the growth we experience in life, such as growing physically, just happens automatically as we grow older. Other kinds of growth require intentional effort on our part - such as growing in enough knowledge to get a degree or growing in certain skills; i.e., athletic or

artistic or knowing how to get along socially with others or managing our finances so we can support ourselves.

Growing in God's grace and holiness is like this second kind of growth. It is intentional on our part. It is not accidental. It involves making a choice that Jesus is more important to us than anything or anyone else. It means choosing to believe that he has come to teach us the way to God and choosing to follow him faithfully. It also involves patience as we wait for the fullness of the kingdom. Just as God has given us the sun and the rain to make the seed grow, so if we put forth the effort spiritually, God will supply the means necessary to produce an extraordinarily abundant harvest in our lives. Investing our lives in him will give us a fantastic return on our investment (30, 60 or 100 fold).