

19th Sunday in Ordinary Time– C Cycle August 7, 2016

[Deacon Jerry Yetter preached for me today]

INTRODUCTION – (*Wisdom 18,6-9; Hebrews 11,1-2.8-19; Luke 12,32-48*)

Faith is our theme. Our second reading today has us reflect on the faith of Abraham and Sarah. Our brief first reading from the Book of Wisdom poetically expresses praise for the faith of God's people in Egypt. Following the directions Moses gave them, they prepared to leave Egypt behind and head out for the Promised Land. Our faith in Christ expresses itself in many ways. Today's gospel stresses living a good life and being ready for the Lord when he comes again.

HOMILY A mother had a fidgety little boy with her in church. During the homily she leaned over and whispered something in his ear and he was good as gold the rest of the Mass. After Mass the priest asked her what she said. She said "If you don't behave, father will lose his place and he will have to start the sermon all over again." I'm sure no one gets fidgety when I preach.

One of the themes Jesus spent so much time and energy preaching about was the theme of the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven. A little historical background will help us understand why the concept of "kingdom" took on such major importance in the hearts and minds of God's people. From 1000 BC to 600 BC, the Jews had a king and a kingdom of their own. Actually it was not their own, but it was God's kingdom, where God was their provider, their protector and their ruler. The king ruled as God's representative. Unfortunately, many kings grossly ignored God's rules and did not lead the people in the ways of God. About 600 BC the Babylonians invaded, plundered, destroyed, enslaved and took control. The Persians (modern day Iran) controlled Israel after they conquered the Babylonians, then Alexander the Great (from Greece) conquered the Persians, and the Greeks controlled all the land from Greece and Egypt to India. The Jews successfully regained their autonomy shortly before the time of Jesus through the Maccabean revolt. Then in 63 BC, Pompey and the Romans conquered the Jews and they were in control for over 500 years. So, at the time of Jesus, Roman rulers governed the land and, with the backing of Roman soldiers, they kept order and made sure taxes were collected for Rome. Paying taxes to a foreign government for the privilege of living in the land God had given them was especially blasphemous to the Jews. This short history might help you understand the Jewish people's desire for freedom and independence at the time of Jesus. Many people believed that God would rescue them from their suffering and from the forces of evil that were in charge. God would punish their enemies and would initiate a utopian era to be enjoyed by God's faithful people. God's kingdom would bring freedom and an end to poverty, suffering, sickness, war and hostilities. John the Baptist proclaimed that he was sent to prepare people for the coming kingdom by calling them to conversion and to a baptism of repentance. His message was: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" (Mt. 3,2) His message was stern and brought many people back to God, and we know how he was beheaded by the tetrarch Herod Antipas for his efforts at reform. Jesus showed his support for John's message and mission by being baptized by John. When Jesus began his own ministry, he and his disciples (several of whom had been disciples of the Baptist) began by baptizing. Like John, Jesus taught that those who were not part of God's kingdom would suffer, but Jesus emphasized even more the unimaginable joy the kingdom would bring to those who belonged to it. He was not afraid to teach people they must live good lives if they wish to belong to God's kingdom. Jesus pictured the kingdom of God in a variety of ways, especially through his parables, his miracles and through reaching out to sinners. If we really want to understand the gospels and to know Jesus' message, we need to understand this concept of the kingdom.

In today's gospel Jesus teaches us to be ready for the kingdom. The people of Jesus' day expected it soon. The earliest Christians expected it soon. Certain groups throughout the centuries have pinpointed the exact day and time it would take place. But Jesus told us clearly no one knows when it will be, so we must always be ready. We don't want to be left out.

Jesus uses two examples: a master who had servants (who most likely were slaves) went to a wedding celebration. Jesus used a wedding celebration as an example, because no one knew when it would end – sometimes not for days. It probably depended on how long the supply of wine lasted (and whether Jesus was there to make more). In that culture a master would never be a table waiter for his servants. What Jesus is telling us by this image is that those who are ready for the kingdom will be blessed beyond their wildest expectations. The second example of a thief also dwells on the idea of uncertainty. No one knows when a thief might come so we must always be prepared.

Almost everything Jesus said and did points to the kingdom. Thus so much more could be said about this central theme of the gospels. I hope maybe, with the few ideas I did offer, we understand a little better what we pray for when we pray: "Thy kingdom come."

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time—C Cycle **August 14, 2016**

INTRODUCTION (*Jeremiah 38,4-6.8-10; Hebrews 12,1-4; Luke 12,49-53*)

Our first reading goes back 600 years before Christ when the Babylonians were attacking Jerusalem. Jeremiah, one of the greatest prophets of all time, kept preaching that it was useless for Israel to defend itself; they should just surrender to the Babylonians or if they did not, Jerusalem would be totally destroyed. His message was viewed as unpatriotic and Jeremiah was called a traitor. Many of the Jewish leaders persuaded their king, Zedekiah, to kill Jeremiah. Zedekiah gave permission for Jeremiah to be thrown into a cistern to die. He later changed his mind.

HOMILY - Today's readings are not cheerful, but life is not always cheerful either. Our inner peace can be destroyed by so many things; such as, big things like war, to issues with bad health, to a disagreement with someone we love. Jesus speaks today of the turmoil that his followers may have to suffer. On the other hand, following Jesus will make life easier. In difficulties, his presence and his love are always with us, and it comforts us in our trials.

It is natural to try to avoid suffering for ourselves. If we have a heart like Christ, we also try to offer help to others who are suffering. That's what I want to talk about today - especially helping the poor who live in our own neighborhood. The Food Research and Action Center, a non-profit advocacy group for eradicating hunger and under-nutrition, rated Ohio as the 13th worst state in the U.S. when it comes to food hardships. Specifically, that means one out of six Ohioans struggle with not having enough food to eat. The president of the Freestore Foodbank said progress towards eradicating the problem is growing, but so is the demand for free meals. The summer represents a huge increase in hunger, especially for children. Ninety to ninety-five percent of children in our own school are eligible for free or reduced lunches – and during the summertime they are not even getting that food (*statistics from the Enquirer, Sunday, July 3, 2016*).

As a parish we do what we can. Through our Vincent de Paul Society, we distribute food on Saturday and through CAIN (*Churches Active in Northside*), we distribute food four days each week. CAIN needs to expand the space it has and so it has naturally come to all of its member churches for help. We pledged \$12,500 for this year and the same for next year. Parish Council

thought this was a fair figure to pledge because it is about half our annual goal for the Catholic Ministries Appeal. Gratefully, we have always been making that goal.

Mimi Chamberlin, who has been director of CAIN since it began 23 years ago, is kind enough to be with us today. Before the end of Mass, she will give us a few more details about where the money will go. You can return your pledge or amount through the baskets when you come to Church here or you can mail them in to CAIN. An envelope and a letter – with pledge card- will soon come to you (if it hasn't already). Please make your check out to CAIN (*Churches Active in Northside*). I ask you, the next time you sit down to a good meal, give a thought and a prayer for those who have not been so well blessed.

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time– C Cycle **August 21, 2016**

INTRODUCTION: Our first reading today (*Is. 66, 18-21*) comes from the time when the Jews were exiled in Babylon. At the time this passage was proclaimed, they had been in exile for about two generations and they had given up any hope of returning to the land of Judea and to their beloved city, Jerusalem. The prophet tells God's disheartened people not to lose hope; they would once again worship in Jerusalem. Moreover, there will come a time when even people from foreign nations would join the Jewish people in worshiping the God of Israel. Most surprising of all, foreigners would be accepted as priests. This radical concept was unthinkable. Basically, the Jews thought they had a monopoly on God's love and they thought that Gentiles had very little chance for salvation or for sharing in God's kingdom. This question about salvation comes up in today's gospel: how many people will be saved. (*Lk 13, 22-30*).

HOMILY: People loved to ask Jesus questions. Some questions were sincere; some tried to back him into a corner. Some questions prompted some of Jesus' most important teachings. At first sight, I thought the question people asked him in today's gospel was a fairly useless question: "Lord, will only a few people be saved?" I wonder if Jesus thought it was fairly useless too because he didn't really answer it.

Even though Jesus did not say how many may or may not be saved, he does give us some very important advice. He answered: "Strive to get through the narrow door – the door that leads to eternal life, and don't wait until the last minute to do it." Only the narrow door will lead to eternal life. The door that's easy to get through will take you to a place where you will find no happiness. The key idea here is that to get through the narrow door requires effort on our part. Jesus said: "**strive** to get through the narrow door." The important word is strive. The Greek word that is translated strive is *agonizomai* – did you hear the English word "agony" in *agonizomai*? What does that mean for us? Does this mean we have to torture ourselves, do a lot of fasting, wear a hair shirt and whip ourselves like the monks in the middle ages? No, that's not what Jesus is asking of us.

The agony we have to go through is to fight against our selfishness and pride. Jesus asks us to pray, to come to Mass, to forgive those who have hurt us, to help the poor, not to abort innocent life; in brief, keep the Commandments. His law does challenge us to live by the values he has taught us. If we fail to do that sometimes, we must remember that God is merciful and always ready to forgive if we approach him with love and sincerity.

In closing, let me return to the question that the people first asked Jesus, the question that I initially thought was useless. I thought about it some more and decided it's not so useless after all

especially if we consider it in light of the Book of Revelation. For the Book of Revelation offers us hope – which is so important for all of us. We find this in chapter 7 of Revelations: “and there was a great multitude that no one could count (notice, a great multitude that no one could count - that doesn’t sound like “a few”) from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne (of God) and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands (a symbol of victory). They cried out in a loud voice, saying, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!’ “The Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” Amen.

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time– C Cycle August 28, 2016

(Sirach 3, 17-18.20.28-29; Heb 12, 18-19.22-24; Luke 14 1.7-14)

The ancient Greeks believed in many different gods. One of those gods was named Narcissus. He had the appearance of a young man and was extremely attractive. While going through the mountains one day, he was noticed by a nymph named Echo. She fell in love for him immediately, but he rejected her. Another goddess named Nemesis, the goddess of revenge, decided to punish Narcissus. She led him to a pool of water and had him look into it so he could see his own reflection. He fell in love with his reflection, not knowing it was a reflection. He made efforts to connect with the person he saw. However, since his love couldn’t be reciprocated and he couldn’t have the object of his desire, he killed himself. Sometimes our pride can actually turn on us and destroy us.

In the name Narcissus we get the adjective that comes from it “narcissistic.” The adjective describes a person who in his or her life shows a significant concern for his or her own self and a minimum concern for others (according to Dr. Karl Menninger: page 159, *Whatever Became of Sin.*) God tells us, “to love our neighbor as ourselves.” Jesus tells us this is one of the two greatest commandments. Although the law may be expressed in different terms, most religions of the world teach this same thing; such as, “do not do to another what you would not want someone to do to you.” This is often called the Golden Rule. If we are to live in peace with one another, we have to establish a certain sense of balance between our concern for ourselves and our concern for others.

Now pride, which this is all about, is a tricky thing to deal with because there is a kind of healthy pride we feel when we have done a good job or accomplished something hard or significant. Healthy pride moves us to take reasonable care of ourselves, to dress appropriately, to use our talents to serve ourselves and others in a positive way. Then there is neurotic pride, a form of pride that pushes everyone else out of our way. It tries to push us to heights of importance greater than we can possibly be; then when we fail, it condemns us or makes us feel as if we are an absolute failure. Perfectionism is a form of neurotic pride because none of us can be perfect at all times –only God is.

Today we hear about Jesus at a wedding banquet. I wonder if Jesus ever went to parties and really enjoyed himself with everyone watching him and looking for something to criticize. On the other hand, he was not shy about telling them what he thought. At this wedding celebration, he observed certain guests putting themselves forward as being especially important. The seating at a formal dinner indicated a person’s position on the social ladder. Some of the guests were not satisfied where they were seated and they wanted a seat that would spotlight their high importance. I think there was some humor in Jesus’ suggestion about taking a less prestigious

position so that the host would invite the person in the low position to move up higher. This probably didn't change a proud person's mindset if their reason for taking a lower place was primarily to be invited to take a higher position. The really important lesson Jesus was trying to teach is near the end of today's gospel: don't just invite people to a dinner or a celebration who you know will pay you back. When you throw a party, do the same; invite people who will not be able to pay you back. Jesus is not talking about throwing parties or going out to dinner. He's talking about doing any kind of a good deed for anyone, whether it gets noticed or not, whether people think what a wonderful person we are, or whether our only reward is the sheer pleasure of having given a helping hand to someone who is in need.

This sounds very much like Matthew's gospel where Jesus rewarded those who did good things for others without recognizing they were doing it for our Lord. I'm sure you remember the passage in Matthew where Jesus said to those who were about to be taken into heaven: "I was hungry and you gave me food, thirsty and you gave me a drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, sick and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me."

We don't need to throw a party in order to find ways we can follow the lesson Jesus teaches us in today's gospel.