

INTRODUCTION: (*Jeremiah 20, 7-9*) Our first reading from the prophet Jeremiah goes back to 600 B.C. It sounds as if Jeremiah thought that when God called him to be a prophet, it would be an easy job and everyone would love him. But the people who heard God's message only hated Jeremiah for what he preached. They ridiculed him, threw him in jail and even tried to kill him. 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 complain or feel duped. 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*) Do you remember last Sunday's gospel? I will summarize it briefly. Jesus was asking his Apostles who they thought he was. Peter, almost always the first to speak, answered: "you are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." Jesus praised Peter and told him he was inspired by God. Peter would have the highest authority in Jesus' kingdom after Jesus himself (remember that's what the keys meant), and Jesus would build his Church on Peter.

We need to consider what exactly the word "Christ" meant when Peter said you are the "Christ." He was saying Jesus was anointed to be a king; Jesus is the one who would rescue God's people from the Romans; he would found a kingdom in which there would be no more poor or sick or blind or lame. Businesses would be operated on the principal of justice and fairness. Evil people would turn their lives around (the Beatitudes tell us all of this). The Jews had been waiting centuries for this Anointed One, for this Messiah. The Anointed One was expected to be a high priest or a judge, or a great warrior, or a prophet or all of these roles combined. Not only did the Apostles see themselves in the presence of greatness, but each of them knew he was destined to have a high and influential position in God's kingdom.

What does all this have to do with today's gospel? Actually the two gospels really belong together. Because today's gospel happens within minutes of what we heard about last week. Within minutes, Jesus goes from praising Peter to telling Peter he is acting like Satan. The Apostles were excited about finding out that Jesus was their Messiah, but they were expecting a super star - a hero, a king, who would rule Israel – maybe he would rule the whole world. Instead of focusing on what had previously taken place, Jesus now began telling the Apostles how he would be made to suffer and he would even be put to death. That was not in the plans. Their Messiah would be powerful enough to overcome any threat against him. Peter again spoke up and told Jesus he had nothing to fear. Jesus told Peter to get lost...all he was doing was being a temptation to Jesus and was not really listening to what his Master was telling him. It just didn't make sense.

Aren't there a lot of things about our faith that do not make sense? In today's gospel we hear Jesus say: "Whoever wishes to save his life will lose it. Whoever loses his life for

my sake will save it.” Or we are told we must love our enemies and forgive them, that we can wash away sin with water or by telling them to a priest, or that when we receive Communion we are eating and drinking the body and blood of Christ. We are told to give away some of our hard-earned money to people who may be less fortunate than we are. Somehow there is a wisdom in the things we do, a wisdom based on the principal that whoever wishes to save his life will lose it and whoever loses his life for my sake (as Jesus says) will find it.

(end with an illustration): Sir Thomas More would not agree with King Henry VIII when King Henry wanted to be the head of the Church in England in 1535. Thomas’ family kept trying to get Thomas to agree to sign the oath of succession making the King of England the head of the Church. Finally Sir Thomas said: “I have a question for you and if you answer it for me next week I will agree.” His family went home and studied all kinds of material on divorce and annulments and when they saw Thomas the next week Thomas asked “what profit would there be for one to gain the whole world and forfeit his life.” Thomas couldn’t go against his conscience. God came first in his life. Thomas More had to live with himself. I’m sure many thought him crazy, and many may think us crazy for the way we live – but I am convinced God teaches us the way to eternal life through Jesus’ teachings, through prayer, Scripture and the sacraments. Amen.

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time – A Cycle

September 10, 2017

INTRODUCTION - (*Ezekiel 33, 7-9*) (*Romans 13, 8-10*) (*Matthew 18, 15-20*) Our first reading takes us back six hundred years before Christ as God explains to his prophet Ezekiel his responsibility as a prophet. Ezekiel must warn God’s people of their sinful ways or Ezekiel himself will be held accountable. It is a prelude to the gospel where Jesus instructs his followers how to help each other stay on the right track. St. Paul’s teaching on love in our second reading reminds us that if we should try to correct one another, it should be done out of love.

HOMILY – We are talking about something today we seldom hear much about - sin. When we sin, we hurt ourselves for we are doing something that takes us further away from God. It’s not just ourselves we hurt when we sin. Most of the time our actions hurt others as well as ourselves. That’s also what makes something a sin because it violates the law of love. This is something that modern Christians do not like to hear. We like to think we are in charge and we can do what we want – with our body, with our activities, with our time, or with our possessions. We forget that we are not as much in charge as we would like to think.

In today’s gospel Jesus gives us some suggestions about how to deal with sin from the perspective of the one who is sinned against. He is not talking about the harm we do to ourselves. That is the focus in other parts of Matthew’s gospel in a number of parables. Jesus is talking about how to react when someone has hurt us and he gives four possible ways we might try to resolve the problem. One Scripture scholar, Douglas Hare said in order to understand today’s gospel, we should first look at the conclusion which says: if they don’t listen to the Church, treat them as an outsider. This gives us a

clue that Jesus is dealing with a pretty large offense. It's not like someone was chewing gum during Mass. It had to be something that affected the spiritual health of the church as a whole.

One or two others might help mediate the situation so that the response to the offense does not reach that final stage. An offense that is harmful to the community needs to be addressed. We address it because we want to preserve unity and love in the community. As St. Paul says: the fulfillment of the law is love. (Romans 13,10) It's a delicate thing to confront another, to persuade them they need to do the right thing.

I was really impressed with a parent I knew. When he faced the unpleasant task of confronting one of his teenagers, he always said God has given you to me for me to care for and to love and I need to talk with you about this issue or this habit because some day I will be standing before God's judgment seat and he will ask me why I didn't do a better job. It sounds like Ezekiel in today's first reading. I know it's one of the hardest jobs I have to do.

I'm not encouraging people to go around nitpicking each another. What I have been saying has to be balanced with love and kindness. Jesus tells us to be careful how we use these steps for he said "judge not, lest you be judged." The Jesus who encourages fraternal correction also told us to take the beam out of our own eye before we try to take the speck out of our brother's eye.

Jesus does not give us a GPS to lead us through life, telling us where to turn, what exit to take off of the expressway, etc. He does give us a compass to guide us in the right direction. We have to struggle with putting up with little annoyances, of trying to get along with one another, or when to say something and how to say it.

Some years ago when I was hearing confessions a little boy came in and confessed he was having difficulty getting along with his sister. I told him that getting along with other people is sometimes a challenge and suggested he say a little prayer before he talks with her and God would hear him and help him. I was rewarded on my good advice when the little boy came to confession a few months later and thanked me for the advice I gave him and he said "it works." Amen.

24th Sunday Ordinary Time

September 17, 2017

HOMILY : Some time ago I met with a lady who told me that I greatly offended her some fifteen years ago. I had no remembrance of what I said. I'm pleased if I can remember something I did a week ago. She carried that hurt around for many years until she confronted me with it. I'm glad she spoke to me about it; it gave me a chance to ask for forgiveness and it was a chance for her to find peace.

Holding on to grudges always eats away the inner peace of the one who holds the grudge. In a family, holding a grudge may be a way of punishing other family members. Then again, other members may not even be aware they are being punished. You

heard the joke about the married couple who had a quarrel and they both stopped talking. After about a week, the husband asked a question about dinner. The wife said, “for food he begins to talk to me.” The husband said, “I didn’t know we weren’t talking – I thought we were just getting along.”

Someone said carrying a grudge is like taking poison and expecting the person you are angry with to suffer its effects. Grudges (which is another word for unforgiveness) always hurt the person who keeps them bottled up in their own psyche. Carrying around a grudge along with anger, hatred and the desire to get even that goes with it takes its toll on us physically, emotionally and spiritually.

At the time of Jesus, the common expectation was to forgive three times – then there was no obligation to forgive. So when Peter asked how often must I forgive – seven times – he was being abundantly generous. Jesus’ answer was really not an answer because he was saying there is no limit – we always have to be forgiving. Why is this? Because that’s the way God has been toward all of us.

Forgiveness can be difficult. It hurts our pride to have to forgive. We think we should have been treated better by someone and so we carry around a grudge which only pulls us down. When we think of forgiveness, we often forget that we have to also forgive ourselves at times. I have run into people who at one time or another fell into serious sin and they never forgave themselves. They beat themselves up whenever they were reminded of what they had done. When God forgives you, you have to forgive yourself. That’s the only way you will have a sense of peace with God.

I have two quick points before I conclude. Sometimes the pain goes so deep that it takes a long time or even therapy to be set free of the hurt that a person has experienced. A person should get the help they need. They will be glad they did after inner peace returns. My second point is that Jesus said, “pray for those who persecute you.” As long as you have that grudge, you are the one who will feel persecuted. Instead of boiling with anger against someone, send a prayer in their direction. It may help the person who hurt you and it will certainly help you. Amen.

25th Sunday in Ordinary Time – A Cycle September 24, 2017

INTRODUCTION: (*Isaiah 25, 6-9; Mt. 20, 1-16*) When God’s people were in exile in Babylon, they were as depressed as anyone could possibly be. They had lost everything. They were sure they had even lost God’s love because of their sinfulness. Today we hear God’s prophet assure them it is never too late to return to the Lord. For God says: “my thoughts are not your thoughts nor are your ways my ways.” Even though they **knew** they were not worthy of God’s mercy, the prophet assures them if they turn back to God, they will have God’s mercy. Why is God so generous and forgiving? It is his nature to be that way.

HOMILY: In today’s parable, we certainly see that God’s thoughts are not our thoughts, nor are our ways, God’s ways. In today’s parable, Jesus tells us this is what the

kingdom of heaven is like and it doesn't sound as if the Lord and Master of the kingdom plays fair.

The landowner must have been very wealthy considering all the people he had to hire to harvest his vineyard. In a normal situation, the landowner would have sent a servant to go look for people to hire and also the servant would pay the workers at the end of the day. But here it is the landowner, the Lord himself, who directs how things are to be in the kingdom. As was the custom of the day, a worker was hired early in the morning and paid at the end of the day (a 12- hour work day). A day's wage for an unskilled worker was often called by the Roman name, denarius. It was just barely enough to support a family for one day. The parable is shocking for us to hear because we tend to look at the story solely from a monetary perspective. We figure if one hour is worth X amount of money, then twelve hours should earn twelve times as much.

But the landowner was looking at things from two perspectives: justice and fairness on the one hand and mercy and generosity on the other. He was fair and just to those who worked all day (since they were paid what had been agreed upon) while he chose to be generous to those who would need enough money to feed their family that day or the next.

I could spend a long time trying to interpret the meaning of this parable – and various saints and scholars have done so and have given various interpretations. I think, basically, the interpretation comes down to two things: justice and mercy. The owner of the vineyard practiced both virtues. In justice he paid what he promised and in mercy he paid enough for each worker to be able to support his family for another day.

Sometimes we feel like God makes us work harder than others to survive in this life and maybe he does. I think we all are beneficiaries of God's mercy. If we just spend our days comparing ourselves with others and feeling as if God was not fair to us when he gave out his blessings to all of us, we're just going to make ourselves miserable. Try to be grateful for the blessings and gifts you do have.

Archbishop Pilarczyk, when he is asked "how are you?" answers "better than I deserve." I think that's true of every person. The only group of human beings who get no chance to experience God's loving kindness in this world are babies who have been aborted. They never had a chance! And yet, I believe, they will somehow experience God's mercy in the next life.

I cannot conclude without pointing out that there is a suggestion of the last judgment in today's parable. The fact that people came to work at different times throughout the day reminds us that there are many opportunities to enter the kingdom, but such opportunities do not go on forever. Summer days are long, winter days are short, but every day lasts only so long and so does each person's life. Jesus always reminds us that the time is limited for us to respond to his invitation to be part of the kingdom. It was what Jesus announced when he first began to preach: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has drawn near." (Mt. 4,17) Amen.