

9th Sunday in Ordinary Time - A Cycle

March 6, 2011

INTRODUCTION: (Deut. 11,18.26-28.32; Rom. 3,21-25; Mt. 7,21-27) When God's people were oppressed and enslaved in Egypt, Moses brought them out of Egypt and led them to freedom and began to take them to the Promised Land. However, when they arrived, the people rebelled. They were afraid to enter the Land, and wouldn't trust that God would protect them from the inhabitants of the Land, so God let them have their way. Consequently, they lived like nomads in the Sinai desert for many years until a new and more courageous generation had grown up. When that next generation had matured, and all those who rebelled against God and Moses had died, Moses again began to lead God's people toward the Promised Land. This new generation was ready to go. When they reached the Jordan River opposite Jericho, Moses knew his job was finished and it was time for him to die. So he sought to leave God's people with some last words of wisdom before they would enter the Land. That is the setting for the entire book of Deuteronomy (a word that means "second law.") Moses reminds God's people of everything God demands of them. In today's passage Moses assures them that if they are faithful to God's word, it will be a source of great blessings for them. To ignore God's word will bring great suffering to God's people. The choice is theirs.

HOMILY: One Sunday as the pastor was giving his homily, he heard two girls in the back giggling and disturbing people. He interrupted his homily and announced sternly, "There are two of you here who have not heard one word I've said." That quieted them down. When the service was over, he went to greet the people at the front door. Three adults apologized for going to sleep in church, promising it would never happen again. (from Reader's Digest, Laughter, the Best Medicine, pg 61)

That's what Moses had to say to God's people before he was to die. That's what Jesus had to say to his listeners as he ended the Sermon on the Mount. Listen to what I have to say. It is listening not just with our ears, but also with our heart and soul and mind and strength.

This is the fifth week now we have heard a part of the Sermon on the Mount. We haven't heard it all. On Wednesday of this week, we will hear more from Jesus' Sermon regarding three traditional practices that have helped people for centuries to grow in holiness: prayer, fasting and almsgiving. These are subjects that fit perfectly with the theme of Ash Wednesday. Today, however, we hear the conclusion of Jesus' Sermon; an appropriate way to conclude all he had said. Jesus laid before us what we must do to enter the kingdom of heaven, and he ends by telling us it's up to us whether we will make that choice.

Did you happen to notice how the Sermon has pretty much one focus, it is trying to show us the way to the kingdom of heaven. Remember how the Sermon on the Mount begins? The opening sentence is: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Jesus seems to tell us we are made for the kingdom for we are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. BUT our holiness must surpass that of the scribes and the Pharisees (those who were thought

to be the holiest people of all among God's people). If we do not surpass them in holiness, we will not enter into the kingdom of heaven. Jesus followed this up with specific examples of what he meant. After teaching us to pray for the kingdom (Thy kingdom come), then we heard him tell us not to be anxious about our daily needs. We are to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be given us besides.

As Jesus finishes his Sermon, he tells us our religion cannot be superficial, it's not just a matter of using the right words or even working great miracles in his name: "Not everyone who says 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who DOES the will of my Father in Heaven." The kingdom of heaven is all about making Jesus the foundation of our lives.

Jesus' final image is so clear. He pictures us all as builders, and indeed we are. Each day of our lives is like another stone that we put into place as we build our lives. Some build fabulous mansions, some build simple but comfortable homes. God gives us all the supplies we really need. Some don't use all the materials they are given. However, the issue is the foundation. Is it on something solid? If it's not Jesus, it will not be solid enough to withstand the stresses and problems of life. The kingdom of heaven is built on our faith in Jesus, a faith that is not just a matter of saying we believe in him, but is a matter of doing what he told us to do. In John's gospel there is no doubt what building our life on him means when he tells us, "If you love me you will keep my commandments." (John 14,15)

The choice is ours. The kingdom of heaven is not an entitlement. There are numerous parables that tell us that, just as Jesus' Sermon on the Mount tells us that. Years ago I spoke to a mother and young daughter who were seldom at Sunday Mass. I asked why I didn't see them very frequently. The mother told me her daughter was involved in sports and often events were on Sundays. As I tried to tell her how important their religion should be to them, the mother told me: "But Father, you don't understand: sports is her life." We can build our lives on all kinds of things, money, career, pleasure, sports, food, etc. All these things have a place in our lives, but they will eventually fail us if we make them our main support. They are like the sand that fails us in the end. We need to take Jesus as our rock and our foundation. Amen.

1st Sunday in Lent - A Cycle

March 13, 2011

INTRODUCTION: (Genesis 2,7-9&3,1-7; Romans 5,12-19;Matthew 4,1-11) Today's first reading tells us the story of the creation of our first parents, their temptation and their fall from grace. The story is more theological than it is historical. It tells us God created the human race to be happy and to share in his grace and friendship. This is indicated by the Garden of Eden. Although all that God made was very good, we know bad things happen in the world, in nature and in the way we deal with one another. This story presents one explanation for the problem of evil in the world, a problem that St. Paul attempts to explain in today's second reading. In these

passages we are told that evil finds its source in our decision to give in to temptation, in our attempt to make our own rules and to use our free will to say "no" to God. In the gospel, Jesus, who has come to save us from evil, has shown us how to resist temptation.

HOMILY: A woman was shopping for a new dress and found the most stunning creation she had ever seen. But it was expensive: \$750. She knew she couldn't afford it, but she had to at least see how she looked in it. So she tried it on and it made her look beautiful. She knew someone else would see it and buy it before she could ever save up for it and she knew she just had to have it. So she bought it. That evening as she showed her husband how beautiful it was and how beautiful she looked with it on, he asked the inevitable question: "how much did it cost?" When she told him he had a fit. She explained the temptation was more than she could resist. He told her when she is tempted she needs to tell the devil: "get behind me, Satan." She pleaded "that's what I did, and the devil told me it looks fantastic from the back too."

Temptations always attract us to something that looks good, even when we know it will not be good for us in the long run - that is the nature of a temptation. And we are all tempted, even Jesus who was perfect, for he was also human like us in every way except sin. In the temptation about the stones into bread, he was being tempted to use his miraculous powers for his own comfort and convenience. He never did, however. He used his miraculous powers to help others. In the other two temptations, he was being tempted to use his special connection with God to gain a following or to create a kingdom according to the standards of this world. He knew, however, that his kingdom would not be of this world and his place in God's kingdom would be to serve and not to be served. He also knew how much would be demanded of him in order to fulfill his role as messiah and savior. He did not cheat, cut corners or waver in any way.

We use the word temptation often in innocent ways. For example, we might say "that piece of pie is very tempting." In most cases this would not be a temptation to sin. There are those times when we know that if we give in to certain temptations we are following the example of our first parents who thought they were smarter than God and that they could find even greater happiness than God had given them if they did their own thing. It was a sin of disobedience and a sin of failing to trust God's love and wisdom.

The story of Jesus temptation in the desert is put before us at the beginning of Lent to encourage us to follow Jesus' example, to set aside time for prayer and self-sacrifice so we can have the strength to overpower the temptations that come to all of us. These two, prayer and self-sacrifice are two of the traditional practices that lead us to holiness. Self-sacrifice is usually represented as fasting from food, and that probably wouldn't hurt most of us to occasionally cut back somewhat on what we eat. But self-sacrifice does not necessarily have to deal with food; it could be fasting from TV, or nasty comments toward others, or smoking, or the internet or whatever it is that might keep our feet stuck in the mud instead of lifting our minds and hearts more toward love of God and love of others.

A third practice that is traditionally recommended to help lead us to holiness is almsgiving, that is, giving to charity. There is no end of possibilities in this area. We all are aware of the great

disaster Japan is experiencing right now. The Archbishop asked all churches to provide an opportunity to help Japan in this emergency and so extra envelopes are in the pews for this purpose. All donations will go to Catholic Relief Services which assists suffering people all over the world and which will certainly be used to help in Japan.

Before the tragedy in Japan, I had my homily written and there was another topic I needed to bring up. Every year around this time we have a special Archdiocesan Collection - formerly misnamed the Archbishop's Annual Fund Drive (since the Archbishop never got any part of it) and which is now appropriately called the Catholic Ministries Appeal. I needed to talk about it today because appeal letters are being sent out this Wednesday from the Archbishop. If you don't get it by the end of this week, you should certainly get it before the end of the month. Your help is needed for the support of major ministries in our Archdiocese. To be brief, I want to mention just three of the major ones: 1) the education of priests, deacons and lay pastoral ministers at the Athenaeum, and if we get more vocations which the Archbishop is trying to do, support for the Athenaeum will be greatly needed; 2) Catholic Charities and Catholic Social Services which provides many services and basic needs to the poor, and 3) the support of retired diocesan priests. This collection helps support Fr. Lammeier in his retirement and someday, if I ever retire, although I'm not in a hurry to, I hope to receive some retirement support from this collection too. This collection takes the place of a pension for priests and the demand in this area keeps increasing because priests, like the rest of society, are living longer. Just those few areas of need I have mentioned take 80 percent of your donation. The other 20 percent will go for chaplains for hospitals and prisons and for St. Rita's School for the Deaf. Nothing is used for Archdiocesan administration. All these worthwhile causes are related to ministries that would be beyond the capability of any single parish to maintain. We do need some substantial gifts to make our goal. I am proud of St. Boniface. Our parish has met our goal every year for the past 19 years that I've been here. So I am very hopeful we will do it again. Our parish goal is \$15,937 which is \$163 less than last year. Again this year I suggest that if everyone who could afford it, would pledge or donate \$100, we would make our goal. However, whatever you can give will be greatly appreciated, even if it's \$5 or \$10. When you receive Archbishop Schnurr's letter, there will be a pledge card and donation envelope with it. You may send it in to the Archdiocese or to St. Boniface or save yourself 44 cents and bring it with you to church and put it in the collection basket. I hope everyone is tempted to be generous. Thank you.

2nd Sunday in Lent - A Cycle

March 20, 2011

INTRODUCTION: (Genesis, 12,1-4; II Timothy 1,8b-10; Matthew 17,1-9) Our first reading takes us back almost 4000 years to Abraham. His name was Abram before God gave him a vocation and a new name. Abram came from an ancient civilization known as Sumer, a settlement near modern day Kuwait. He and his family migrated to the northern part of Syria, near Turkey. After a lengthy stay there, he heard God's call to leave his kinfolk behind and move to the land of

Canaan - modern day Israel. He left behind a prosperous commercial area to settle in a land that was still relatively primitive and undeveloped. Abraham made this long and difficult journey at the tender age of 75 along with his wife, Sarah, who was 10 years younger. God was telling them, not only to pack up and move to an unknown territory, but to start a family there as well! It was a pure act of faith on the part of Abraham to follow God's call and to believe in the blessings God kept promising him, promises we hear in today's first reading. In the gospel, we have Matthew's account of the Transfiguration, which was a promise to Jesus' disciples and which is a promise to us of great blessings God has in store for us.

HOMILY: Several years ago the pope came to the United States. As he was being driven from the airport, he was admiring the limo he was riding in. He was so impressed with what a nice car it was that he asked the driver whether he could drive it. How could the driver say "no" to the pope, so he traded places with the pope. The pope was having such fun driving, that before he knew it he was seriously exceeding the speed limit, weaving in and out of traffic and cutting off other drivers. Of course, a policeman spotted him and ran him down. As the policeman walked toward the car, he noticed the man in the back seat but he was really shocked when he saw who was driving. He walked back to his squad car and radioed the police chief. He said "I don't know what to do. I just flagged down a really important person." The chief said "well give him a ticket." The officer said, "you don't understand. He's really important." The chief said "well who is it, a Senator, the governor, the president?" The officer said, "I don't know who he is, but whoever he is, he's got the pope as his chauffeur."

Today we hear about Jesus whose importance far outweighs anyone who ever lived. St. Matthew tells us today of Jesus' transfiguration. The event is recorded four times in the New Testament. In all three of the gospels, the transfiguration is preceded by Peter's confession of Jesus as Messiah. Jesus had asked the disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" He then asked, "Who do you say that I am?" In Mark and Luke, Peter answered, "you are the Messiah." In Matthew, Peter adds "? the Son of the Living God." After this wonderful profession of faith, Jesus began to teach the apostles that he would suffer, be put to death and on the third day be raised. That's when Peter got in trouble with Jesus. He told Jesus none of that would happen to him. No one at that time, no teacher or writing, connected the two, for the messiah was to be a powerful leader who would victoriously conquer all the enemies of the Jewish people and establish forever a kingdom of peace and justice under God's rule.

I think those who chose the reading for the transfiguration left out three very important words in today's gospel. The gospel should begin, "After six days" or "six days later" (Luke tells us "eight days" but you get the idea). How often do we see this in the gospels when two events are linked together in this way. Most of the time, Jesus' teachings and miracles are strung together like "pearls on a string" as one scholar described it, without much attention to sequence. An event that took place late in Jesus' ministry might be recounted as having taken place early in his ministry by another of the gospel writers. The cleansing of the Temple would be a prime example. But here, the transfiguration is definitely connected with the question of who Jesus is and the sufferings he would have to face. In Fr. Bruce Vwater's marvelous book (which I use so much that it's practically falling apart), a book entitled : The Four Gospels, Fr. Vwater tells us

"Peter's confession and its sequel (i.e. the passion) ? form a unit with the transfiguration to set forth in all its fullness what the ? gospels want to say of the historical Jesus as the Christ." The transfiguration is a visible manifestation of who Jesus is and where his sufferings would lead. Lest there be any doubt about the matter, God the Father spoke up to make things clear: "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

How does all that apply to us? It gives us hope in our own times of suffering. Suffering and death will not have the last word in the lives of those who follow Jesus for just as Jesus could predict that he would be raised, he promises us a share in his glory and in his kingdom: "For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in him may have eternal life, and I shall raise him on the last day." (John 6,40)

It is a promise, an assurance, a message to give us hope through difficult times. The apostles wanted to stay on the mountain. It was so wonderful experiencing God's glory as it was displaying itself in Jesus. Jesus' work was ahead of him, so this event was only a preview. Jesus had to leave the mountain and come back down to earth, back to the day-to-day ministry to God's people and dealing with the suffering he knew he would have to face, and they would have to do the same. Until they (and we) enter into eternal glory with Jesus, God the Father gives a word of guidance and direction to all who would follow his Son: "Listen to him." It only stands to reason that we won't do a very good job of following if we don't listen. Amen.

3rd Sunday in Lent - A Cycle

March 27, 2011

INTRODUCTION: (Exodus 17,3-7; Romans 5,1-2.5-8; John 4,5-42) In our first reading, we hear of an event that takes place as Moses is leading God's people through the desert to the Promised Land. It was probably two or three months since they left Egypt. Twice the Bible tells us God had provided, in a marvelous way, food and water for them. They needed water again. It sounds as if even Moses doesn't know what to do next to get the people the water they need for themselves, their children and their livestock. God, of course, took care of them. The reading prepares us for the gospel when we hear Jesus offer "living water" to a woman he meets in Samaria as he is traveling south toward Jerusalem. She misunderstands the term "living water" until Jesus reveals to her that it is something that Jesus can give that would sustain her throughout this life's journey and into eternal life. He offers this living water to us today as we meet him in faith and prayer.

HOMILY: A little child came home one day from religion class and his mother asked him what he learned. He answered, "all about Moses; how God sent Moses behind enemy lines to rescue God's people who were slaves in Egypt. The teacher told how Moses led them as far as the Red Sea. Then he had his engineers build a pontoon bridge so all the people could cross the Sea. Then he dynamited the bridge after they crossed so the Egyptians couldn't catch up with them. And then all God's people traveled safely through a desert to the Promised Land." His

mother said, "Now, Brad, is that what the teacher really taught you?" Brad answered, "Well, no mom, but if I told you the way she really told us, you would never believe it."

It does take a lot of faith to believe in all the miracles mentioned in the Bible. Today we hear about another one as God miraculously provides water from a rock for his people during their desert journey. Today, in his marvelous storytelling style, John tells us about Jesus who desires to offer all who would believe in him living water, a miracle infinitely more wondrous than the fabled fountain of youth. Jesus very cleverly introduces the idea by asking for a drink. The Samaritan woman was shocked - not only because Jews and Samaritans hated one another and had nothing to do with one another, but also because in that culture men never spoke with women in public, least of all one who was a stranger. By offering living water, Jesus was deliberately vague, offering something she would see as a great convenience, without having any idea how precious a gift it is he offers. Notice how Jesus controls the conversation and he keeps directing her to faith in himself. When he brings up something personal about her, her intimate life with a man to whom she is not married, then it gets really spooky for her. She quickly changes the subject, but he persists in fascinating her - so much so that she becomes fascinated enough to spread the word to her neighbors about this unique person she had met.

Living water is not the only image or symbol Jesus uses to reveal who he is and the eternal life he came to bring us; he refers to himself as the bread of life, the light of the world, the good shepherd, the lamb of God, the vine of which we are the branches, the resurrection and the life, just to name a few of the other images Jesus uses. The important message I get from today's reading is that the more we engage with Jesus in reflection and prayer, even in spite of distractions, the more he seeks to lead us into a deeper relationship with himself and with the Father. Amen.

*Fr. Joe vacationed during the next two weeks,
so there are no homilies for the 4th and 5th Sunday's of Lent.*