

## Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time - B Cycle

February 5, 2012

**INTRODUCTION:** (Job 7,1-4.6-7; I Cor 9,16-19.22-23; Mark 1,29-39) We hear from Job in our first reading. He was prosperous and happy. Then suddenly he lost everything; hostile tribes destroyed his cattle, his sheep, his camels and his workers. A violent wind collapsed the house where his children were gathered for a meal and it killed them all at once. Soon after Job's health began to deteriorate and his skin was covered with sores. He was not a happy guy as he laments: "I shall not see happiness again." Job, who was always faithful to God, complained God was being unfair to him. At the time this book was written, God's people believed that if we are good, all will go well, and if we're not, all kinds of terrible things will happen to us. At the same time they were beginning to discover that life doesn't always work that way. Like Job we still struggle to answer the question of why good people suffer? The gospel is in contrast with the pathetic story of Job where we see Jesus at work trying to lessen people's sufferings by his many exorcisms and healings.

Contrary to Job who is deeply depressed, St. Paul, in today's second reading, is full of enthusiasm with his ministry of preaching the gospel. He's not doing it because he wants to get rich (actually, for the most part he provided for his own needs, working as a tentmaker). He is using himself as an example for the Corinthians to follow in teaching them to unselfishly serve God and lovingly serve one another.

**HOMILY:** I want to talk mostly of the picture St. Mark gives us of a day in the life of Jesus. It is a busy day as we will see. I will stick to this topic except for a brief theological digression. So first we start with this "eventful day" in the life of Jesus. It is told with some details suggesting this comes from the recollection of an eyewitness. The "eventful day" began with last Sunday's gospel with Jesus at synagogue in Capernaum on the Sabbath. He was teaching there. A man in the congregation, who was possessed by an unclean spirit, challenged Jesus for being there and Jesus, with a simple command, expelled the demon. Today's gospel continues on with Jesus going to the home of Peter and Andrew after the service was over. There has been some archeological work in Capernaum which gives us a picture of how people lived then. I remember being at the spot where the synagogue once stood where Jesus taught. Nothing is left of it now except the foundation. Nearby was the home of Peter. It was part of a complex of about five small dwellings connected together, gathered around a courtyard, that would have housed related families. Living in that complex would be uncles, aunts, children, grandparents, cousins, etc. It may seem fanciful to imagine that people have identified where Peter lived, but it is well supported that this was the home of Peter because one particular room has been venerated and preserved as Peter's home since the mid first century. Most probably Peter and Andrew were bringing Jesus to where they lived to get something to eat. But Peter's mother in law, probably the main cook, was sick. One can assume that Peter was married at the time of his call. There is a passage in Paul's letter to the Corinthians (I Cor. 9,5) that suggests that his wife accompanied him on his apostolic journeys. That Peter's mother-in-law got up immediately and waited on them shows that Jesus' healing was effective.

Since this was still the Sabbath, it was not until evening, after sunset, when the neighbors could bring to Jesus many who were sick or possessed. (To transport them during the Sabbath would have been an offense against the Law.) In the Jewish culture the day ends at sunset and a new day begins (just as we end our day at midnight and begin the next day at that time.) So the Sabbath was over when the sun set and people could bring the sick to Jesus. Mark said he cured many whereas Matthew said he cured them all. The meaning is the same (Mark means that there were many and he cured them.)

Now a theological digression. You might have noticed that when the priest consecrates the wine during Mass, he says "this is the chalice of my blood, the blood of the new and eternal covenant, which will be poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins." It used to say "it will be shed for you and for all so that sins may be forgiven." This change has troubled some people. The original Greek uses the word "many" which our theology teaches us means everyone. Paul says it clearly in II Cor. (5, 14-15) If some people are troubled by the use of the word "many" in the consecration of the wine, because they fear that implies that some people will not benefit from Christ's saving death, they should be especially troubled by a number of parables where Christ clearly teaches that many will not enjoy the blessing of his saving death, through their own choice, for the invitation into his kingdom has been offered to all, but not everyone chooses to respond.

Back to Mark's story, the next morning, Jesus is up before anyone else and goes off to a quiet place to pray. Notice how important prayer was to him. He needed to gain strength from his Heavenly Father, as we all do, in order to deal with everyday challenges.

To save all people, which is God's desire ("God wants all people to be saved" according to Paul (I Timothy 2,4)), Jesus knew he couldn't just settle down in Capernaum to teach and heal and cast out demons. So he moved on, and he continues to move on today, offering eternal life to anyone who chooses to believe in him and follow him. That's what brings us here today. We believe he is the way to God, so in faith we offer him our love and ask him to walk with us as we make our journey through life. Amen.

## **Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time - B Cycle**

**February 12, 2012**

**INTRODUCTION:** Our first reading is from the Book of Leviticus, the third book in the Bible. The name Leviticus is mostly made up of instructions for the levitical priesthood. There are many rules about feast days, fast days, worship, sacrifice and ordination. When people decide they are going to read the Bible from beginning to end, they usually give up their good intention to do so when they start reading Leviticus because it is page after page of Jewish law. There is a section on legal purity meaning who is allowed to participate in public worship. Two full chapters

deal with how to deal with "leprosy." Our first reading today is a tiny passage taken from one of these chapters. Without the sophistication of modern medicine, the term "leprosy" was applied to almost any kind of skin disease: such as ringworm, psoriasis, eczema and leprosy itself. Anyone so afflicted with such diseases was required to avoid contact with anyone else lest the disease spread to the whole community. A "leper" could not work, go to synagogue or temple or even visit his or her family. Usually a "leper" ended up living in caves or tombs, alone or with other "lepers." It was the priest's job to decide when a person was disease-free and allow that person to re-enter society. Our first reading connects to the gospel which tells us about Jesus healing a "leper."

**HOMILY:** If you or I had happened to be with Jesus at the time this leper came up to him, we would have been shocked. The leper broke the rules coming up to Jesus and the disciples who most probably were with him. He should have stood at a distance and warned them not to come any nearer. Yet he came right up to Jesus and knelt down before him. The law would have forbidden any contact with the leper, yet Jesus touched him. That contact would have made Jesus legally unclean; however, instead it made the leper clean and it happened "immediately." Notice Jesus did not show any indication of disgust or offence, rather Jesus felt sorry for the man as Mark tells us.

I cannot read this gospel without thinking of St. Francis. There was a colony of lepers near Assisi. One of Francis' major life-changing events was to be approached by a leper begging alms. Francis felt repulse for the lepers; he would turn his head so he didn't have to see them and hold his nose because they gave off a terrible stench. However, shortly after Francis began to seek God, when the leper approached him Francis gave the man alms and kissed his hand. Then, with his disfigured face, the leper looked at Francis and the leper lifted his hands for the kiss of peace (which would have been an embrace). Francis could have run away, and there would have been plenty of reason to do so, but instead Francis embraced the leper, whose sores were oozing with pus, and kissed him. Francis, in his Testament, a document he dictated before he died, said of this event: "what seemed to me as bitter was transformed into sweetness of the soul and the body." After that encounter Francis was no longer the same person. Francis did not heal the leper as Jesus did, on the contrary, the leper seems to have healed Francis of any last shred of egoism or self-centeredness. Unlike in today's gospel, God did not remove the suffering of the leper, but the suffering of the leper helped God to create a great saint in Francis, a saint who has touched many millions.

In our gospel today, Jesus told the man he healed not to tell anyone else what Jesus had done. We find this often in the gospels, especially Mark, where Jesus does not want people to know about his miracles. Scripture scholars refer to this as the Messianic secret. Why would Jesus command this secrecy? Perhaps for a practical reason; as we hear in today's gospel, Jesus and his disciples had no time to themselves. But there is a deeper reason that is often given, Jesus didn't want people to see him merely as an exorcist or healer or a person who could calm a storm or feed a multitude. If that's what they thought he was all about, then they would have expected him to raise an army and expel the Romans from their land. That is not the kind of Messiah he was. His mission involved saving God's people through his suffering. Once when he

predicted his sufferings, Peter protested that Jesus, the Messiah, would never have to suffer. As with other predictions, the apostles didn't get the message. So with Jesus knowledge of what was ahead he decided that he had to keep his identity somewhat hidden until other aspects of his mission would become clear.

Like Peter, we all hate to suffer or to see others suffer. That's perfectly normal. Our gospel today reveals that the God we worship is a God who takes pity on us in our weaknesses and sufferings and seeks to help us and heal us. I have read and heard of people with healing powers and I personally experienced healings through prayer, especially through the sacrament of the sick. I do not know why God heals some and not others. I do know this: Most often when people ask God for a special favor, they want it to happen like it did in today's gospel: immediately. That would be nice, but it usually doesn't seem to work that way. Remember when Jesus healed 10 lepers, they were not healed until they were on their way to meet with a priest who could declare whether they were clean or not. What I have seen most of the time is that when people pray for something and it doesn't happen they give up praying too soon. But God's ways are not our ways. On some occasions God may use illness or suffering for a purpose we do not understand. On other occasions, God may intervene directly. On still other occasions, God may work through others, especially health care professionals. Although I've seen prayer bring immediate results, more times than not it works better when we don't give up praying but keep at it. Jesus tells us in his teachings on prayer: Keep on asking, keep on knocking...with faith. Amen.

## **Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time - B Cycle**

**February 19, 2012**

### **INTRODUCTION**

When God freed his people from their slavery in Egypt under the leadership of Moses, they traveled east, across the Sinai desert to the land of Canaanites. It was a wonderful experience to no longer be slaves and to have a nation of their own. But often they allowed themselves to be seduced by the sensuous pagan customs of their Canaanite neighbors and this led to the moral breakdown of the individual, the family and the nation. When they were attacked by the Babylonians in 597 B.C. and 587 B.C., their nation and their leaders did not have the strength to defend against the attack. So they once again found themselves to be slaves and exiles in Babylon. They tried to blame previous generations for this disaster, but the wisest among them realized they were just as guilty as previous generations in bringing this disaster down upon their nation. Almost 50 years later, we hear in today's first reading the prophet announced that once more God is about to set his people free. Indeed, God did set his people free through the instrumentality of Cyrus, the king of Persia, who conquered the Babylonians and decreed in 538 B.C. that the Jewish exiles could return to their own land.

Today's first reading is a good parallel to the gospel where a man, enslaved both to sin and to

paralysis, was brought before Jesus so Jesus could liberate him from his afflictions. The second reading is a bit hard to understand, but it will make a little more sense if we realize Paul is defending himself against the charge of being wishy-washy.

## **HOMILY**

St. Mark's use of a few concrete details almost brings us right into the room where Jesus was teaching. This is a healing miracle that has some elements that we do not find in any of Jesus' other miracles. Let's picture the house for a moment. Palestinian houses were very simple, perhaps one to three rooms. The roof on the house was made of mud and thatch and maybe some flat stones. A house would typically have a ladder outside because often people slept on the roof of their homes, especially during hot summer nights. Although the roof could have easily been broken open, and it surely caused a lot of debris to fall on the people down below, it was still a strange way to approach Jesus. Evidently the friends of the paralyzed man were eager to get their invalid friend to see Jesus so that he could be helped. Jesus first of all forgave the man's sins - something we do not see in other miracles and something that caused quite a stir among the experts in the law. It may seem strange to us, too, for Jesus to begin to heal the man by forgiving his sins. The more I thought about it, the more I realized that this demonstrates what modern science has been researching for the past 30 or 40 years: how our mind and body are connected and especially how our attitudes, our emotions, our stressful experiences affect us physically - specifically how they affect our immune system. It's a whole area of study called psychoneuroimmunology. There are many examples of the mind-body connection; let me offer just one: the inability or the refusal to forgive someone who has hurt us. In holding on to grudges a person, whether they know it or not, is in a constant low level emotional state of anger, which does things like cause the heart to beat faster, raise one's blood pressure, produce tenseness, and gastrointestinal activity. This example does not apply specifically to the man in today's gospel, but apparently the man needed a healing in his relationship with God before he could be healed physically. So Jesus proceeded to help the man, first spiritually, then physically. There was no way anyone could argue with what was so obvious, that Jesus exercised a divine prerogative and that he could speak with power and authority. In spite of the obvious power Jesus demonstrated, the experts in the law were bent out of shape; they could see he would be a threat to their own sense of having the ultimate authority where God is concerned, and Jesus was doing something that they could not. The charge they leveled against him, "he is blaspheming," would be the same as they would charge him before they put him to death.

In talking about the mind-body connection and how the mind can affect the body, I'm not talking about psychosomatic illnesses, where people think they are sick when they're not. I'm talking about how our body can really be sick, because we are not well spiritually or emotionally. This is not to say that all sickness comes from some spiritual or emotional disorder or inability to cope adequately, but sometimes it does. Our spirit, our mind, and our body do interact with one another.

Jesus announced the kingdom of God - a kingdom where there would be no more pain or sadness, sickness or even death. Likewise, there would be no place for sin to exist in God's

kingdom. As we approach Lent, we are given again opportunities to grow in God's grace and love and prepare ourselves for that kingdom where we will know life to the full, and when we will have a glorified body, which will be whole as well as holy. Amen.

## **1st Sunday of Lent - B Cycle**

**February 26, 2012**

### **INTRODUCTION** (Gen. 9, 8-15; I Peter 3, 18-22; Mark 1, 12-15)

I want to call your attention to the word "covenant" in today's first reading, an important concept that will dominate our first readings every week during Lent this year. Typically "covenants" were quite common centuries ago and they were somewhat similar to what we call a "contract" today. A "covenant" was a serious commitment or promise two parties (be they individuals or nations) made to each other. It defined the relationship and the expectations they had of one another. The word "covenant" is not in common use today except when people speak of the marriage covenant. (We also hear it at the consecration of the wine during Mass.) When God chose to enter into a relationship with his people he made a covenant with them. He promised what he would do for them and told them what he expected of them. Today we hear about the covenant God made with Noah and with all of creation after the great flood. Notice this covenant is unusual in that God promises what he will do for his people while he asks nothing of his people in return. St. Peter, in the second reading, tells us the covenant God made with Noah and his family prefigured baptism which is God's pledge to us of salvation and eternal life.

**HOMILY** - St. Mark begins his gospel by telling us about John the Baptist and his mission of calling people to repent and to prepare for the imminent Day of the Lord. Jesus was baptized by John as a sign that Jesus accepted John's mission and message. After introducing John to us, Mark tells us Jesus was baptized by John. On that occasion the Holy Spirit visibly came down upon Jesus. Mark then tells us immediately the Spirit drove Jesus (the Greek uses a very forceful term here) out into the wilderness. Matthew and Luke tell us of three of the temptations Jesus experienced. Mark, the earliest and shortest of our gospels, tells us simply Jesus was in the wilderness for 40 days, tempted by Satan. I wish to mention just two practical ideas in today's short gospel: 1) no matter how filled with the Spirit we may be, we are not immune from the temptations of the evil one. And 2) sometimes as a person seeks to grow spiritually, there are dry periods, periods when a person feels as if God has abandoned them. Spiritual writers refer to this as a desert period in our spiritual journey. It is a challenge to a person's faith, and yet it is a time of great spiritual growth as a person continues to struggle through it. Numerous saints have described the desert experiences they have gone through. There is a wonderful book by Thomas Green, S.J. called *When the Well Runs Dry* which beautifully describes these periods of dryness and helps a person hold on to their faith through such times. As the Church calls us to use this holy time of Lent to remove some of the distractions that clutter our lives and to focus more on Jesus and on our faith, the Church presents us with the scene of Jesus going off to the wilderness for 40 days to reflect and pray.

Today I have a second topic I would like to touch on. You may have seen in Parish Council minutes or heard rumblings that we have been thinking about cleaning the church for our 150th anniversary next year. I do not believe there is another church in Cincinnati that is more beautiful than St. Boniface. Visitors who come here for the first time always remark how impressed they are with seeing it. We have made some big (and expensive improvements) in past years. Parishioners have always given us support because they love St. Boniface. We continue to make improvements, little ones and big ones. For example we finished St. Patrick's statue, which is back on its stand. We are refurbishing the restrooms. As we often have funeral visitation here in church and there isn't enough room for people to gather, we hope to remove about five pews from the back of church to make a gathering space. Our maintenance men are doing those little projects. The big project that is coming up is painting the church. We wanted simply to clean it, and patch up and touch up bad spots, but we decided there was so much that needed special attention, from the ceiling on down, it made sense to repaint everything. The sanctuary, especially the gold dome, is really filthy. You can see the beams showing up through the paint in the ceiling, and there is more water damage than you would imagine. It's been 50 years since the church has been painted, so it is an opportune time to do so - especially since scaffolding would have had to be put up anyway to do any cleaning and fixing up. We are not going to change the colors. We thought the color scheme is very nice and it has held up very well. We are not going to get rid of the angels in the sanctuary, just clean them up and repair any of them that are damaged. We discovered too, that before we do any repairs or painting, we need a new roof over the two transepts and the sacristies. Otherwise we will very quickly get water damage on our new paint job. Our maintenance man, Al Murnan, has done an excellent job taking care of the roof, but the situation is there are three roofs on top of the two transepts and you cannot find where all the leaks are because they are hidden under other roofs. The insulation between the roofs constantly remains soaked because the water can't evaporate. So getting new roofs comes first. The roof is going to be about \$60,000. We recently received a generous donation of \$40,000 that will help with the roof. The painting and repair inside church will be about \$175,000. I know you are all getting your wallets out in order to make a big donation, but this is not a money talk. What money we need for these projects will come from our reserved funds, but if anyone wants to give any additional help with this we wouldn't turn it down. It should not affect our normal operating expenses as I think that the increased offertory support program we had last fall is doing well. After the last three years when we were in the red, I expect we will come out in the black this year. We may even end up a little ahead which will help us with these projects. I know people like to know what's going on at our parish, so I'm telling you this because I want everyone to know what we are doing to care for our church. I hope to stay here with you as long as I am healthy enough to keep serving. I want to thank everyone for the support they give to St. Boniface. So thank you.