

2nd Sunday of Lent - B Cycle

March 4, 2012

INTRODUCTION: Last week we heard about God's covenant with Noah; God promised he would never again cause a flood that would destroy all life on earth. The sign of that covenant is the rainbow. Sometime roughly 1750 years before Christ, although the date cannot be established precisely, God entered into another important covenant with a person named Abram. God promised Abram numerous blessings, including many descendants. In return, God asked Abram simply to trust him. Today we hear how Abram (whose name has by now been changed to Abraham) remained trusting in a most difficult situation. Abraham must have felt great anguish when he sensed God was asking him to sacrifice his beloved son, Isaac. Be sure to notice our stained glass window that is above our cry room door. It is a story that reflects great trust on the part of Abraham. I often wonder if God really asked this of Abraham or if Abraham imagined God was asking this of him. Human sacrifice was common to Abraham's culture. At the end of the story, we hear God say, "I swear by myself, that because you acted as you did in not withholding from me your beloved son..." then God repeats the blessings he had originally promised Abraham when he saw that Abraham had lived up to his part of the covenant.

HOMILY: As I was reflecting on today's gospel of the Transfiguration, the one feature of the story that struck me was that Jesus took Peter, James and John with him. The rest of the apostles were down at the base of the high mountain trying unsuccessfully to cast out a demon. Jesus was especially close to Peter, James and John. He took them with him when he brought Jairus' daughter back to life. After the Last Supper, when he went to the garden of Gethsemane to pray, all his apostles joined with him, but he invited Peter, James and John to be especially near him. So, as he went up Mt. Tabor, the mountain traditionally identified as the mount of the Transfiguration, only Peter, James and John went with him. Did he need their support and companionship at this particular time?

Many times he prayed alone. He even taught us that when we pray, we should not be like hypocrites who are showy about it, but we should go into our room and shut the door and pray to the Father in secret. (Mt. 6,6) On the other hand, Jesus emphasized the value of not praying alone. He said: "I tell you truly, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." (Mt. 18,19-20) Jesus himself prayed publicly and with others. Often in the gospels we find him in synagogues or in the Temple. All the apostles were with him at the Last Supper when he prayed in their company and he prayed a very lengthy prayer. The whole 17th chapter of John's gospel is called Jesus' high priestly prayer at the Last Supper. Jesus only told us to pray in secret to make the point that we should not be showy about it like some of the Pharisees.

The greatest prayer we have is the Eucharist, when Jesus blessed bread and wine at the Last Supper and changed it into his body and blood. And he told us "Do this in memory of me." How

could we ever do what he told us to do if we didn't come together in prayer. The reason this is the greatest prayer we have is because it is a renewal of Jesus' perfect sacrifice on the cross. Jesus is our high priest who at Mass offers his love and obedience to the Father in one perfect act and we are allowed to join in his perfect sacrifice.

In brief, Jesus showed us and taught us that we should pray both in the privacy of our own hearts and that we should pray with one another. What a powerful experience it must have been to be in the company of Jesus when he was praying. Certainly it was a powerful experience for Peter, James and John on this one occasion when Jesus was transfigured on the mountain. If Peter, James and John had not been with him, they would have missed out on this fantastic experience of seeing Jesus in glory. I mentioned earlier that the other apostles were busy at the bottom of the mountain trying to cast out an evil spirit, but they were not having any success. It wasn't until Jesus came down and commanded the spirit to leave that the possessed child was set free from the evil power that controlled him. The apostles asked Jesus why they had no success casting it out and he said, "this kind can only come out through prayer (some manuscripts add 'and fasting')." Jesus had been praying and his prayer was powerful. Peter, James and John, because they were with him, witnessed it all.

I felt this aspect of the Transfiguration needed to be stressed because I feel a lot of people have given up communal prayer. Many say they pray on their own. This is good, but Jesus has shown us, by his example and teaching, the value of praying with others. I heard it said the other day that the second largest Christian denomination in the United States is inactive Catholics. Those who think they don't need to go to "Church" to serve and worship God should know that the word "Church" in Greek means "a gathering" or "an assembly." How can someone say I belong to this gathering but I don't really belong. The Church teaches that we have a serious obligation as Catholic Christians to come together with Jesus on the Lord's Day to pray together, to offer together to the Father the perfect sacrifice that Jesus gave us at the Last Supper. People sometimes say, "I don't get anything out of it." The question could be asked, "do we pray only to get something? Don't we also pray in order to give something - to give God ourselves, our worship, our love." When we seek to give something is often when we get something. I would suspect that Peter, James and John prayed with Jesus many other times, but this one time, something powerful happened. If they hadn't been with him, they would never have had the experience. St. Francis tells us: "It is in giving that we receive." So let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

3rd Sunday of Lent - B Cycle

March 11, 2012

INTRODUCTION: [Exodus 20, 1-17; I Cor. 1, 22-25; John 2, 13-25] Covenant is a theme that keeps recurring in our first reading these Sundays of Lent. The first Sunday of Lent we hear about God's covenant with Noah. Last Sunday we heard about God's covenant with Abraham and how Abraham's trust in God was tested when he heard God tell him to sacrifice his son.

Today, the third Sunday of Lent, we hear about God's covenant with his people as they traveled under the leadership of Moses from slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land. Typically a covenant had two parts, what each party to the covenant promised they would do for one another. God, for his part of the covenant, had promised his people liberty, land, prosperity and his special care and love. Today's first reading tells us what God expected of his people in return for the blessings he promised them.

HOMILY: All four gospels tell us about Jesus cleansing the Temple. John's account of the cleansing of the Temple is at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, whereas in the other three gospels it occurred shortly before Jesus was put to death. While scholars do not dispute its historicity, they argue about whether it occurred at the beginning or the end of Jesus' ministry. Jesus' zeal for God's house moved him so deeply that he challenged the Temple authorities in the dramatic way we just heard. The money changers and those who sold animals for sacrifice were offering a legitimate service to those who came to offer sacrifice to God, but those changing money from Greek coins to approved Temple currency and those selling the animals for sacrifice obviously took advantage of the people who came to worship. Jesus said that they had made the Temple into a den of thieves. Josephus, the Jewish historian, is quoted as saying that the High Priest, who no doubt benefitted from all these dealings, was "the great procurer of money."

Some scholars see this event more as a sign that the Temple would be destroyed rather than as a cleansing or reform of the Temple practice. The story of this Temple is tragic. It had been under construction for 46 years and it would be roughly another 40 years before it was completed. Then just about 4 or 5 years after completion the Romans destroyed it in the Jewish revolt. Jesus did predict the destruction of the Temple and, even in today's reading, he talks about it being destroyed but he would raise it up in three days. It wasn't until after Jesus' resurrection that his Apostles understood what he was telling them. It was a way for him to say he would replace the Temple and that his sacrifice, because his sacrifice would be a perfect sacrifice, would replace all other sacrifices. We are privileged to be part of that perfect sacrifice of Jesus every time we come to Mass.

Religion has a legitimate need for money. There are buildings to be maintained. There are those dedicated to the service of God who need to have food and clothing and a place to live. The poor need to be helped. Jesus paid the Temple tax. He encouraged people to help the poor. He respected the Temple. Religious people who support the work of religion do not need to be gouged or cheated or taken advantage of. Apparently that's what the Temple authorities were doing and Jesus set them straight.

I know that most of you received a letter from the Archbishop this week asking your help with many of the ministries that take place in our Archdiocese. I hope you read the letter and gave it serious consideration. We have many special collections throughout the year, but this is the really big one (the Catholic Ministries Appeal). You've heard me talk about finances a number of time recently. I don't want you to think I'm doing it because I enjoy it. I would much rather talk

about Jesus, but it's my job to occasionally address such practical matters. I want you to know that if I encourage your support of some project, I myself put my money where my mouth is. I don't just talk about it; I support it too.

To be brief, I want to mention just three of the major efforts that the Catholic Ministries Appeal supports: 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; I received my education at the Athenaeum, so did Deacon Ted and Deacon Jerry, so did our parishioners who went through the Lay Pastoral Ministry Program and who serve or have served our parish so professionally. 2) the collection helps Catholic Charities and Catholic Social Services which provides many services such as counseling, and it offers a number of basic needs to the poor, and 3) it supports retired diocesan priests. We have no pension. This collection for the Catholic Ministries Appeal takes the place of a pension. This collection helps support priests like Fr. Stricker, Fr. Lammeier and about 75 other priests. The demand in this area keeps increasing because priests, like the rest of society, are living longer. I guess if after I retire (if I ever do) and I have to go dumpster diving for my dinner, I didn't do a very good job with my talk on the Catholic Ministries Appeal.

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 St. Rita's School for the Deaf. Nothing is used for Archdiocesan administration. All these worthwhile causes are ministries that are beyond the capability of any single parish, or any group of parishes, to maintain. All parishes need to do their share for the good of the diocese. We will need a few heavy hitters to meet our goal which sets the bar higher than last year. I am proud of St. Boniface. Our parish has met our goal every year for the past 20 years that I've been here. So I am very hopeful we will do it again. Our parish goal is \$17,855. The goal is set for each parish based on that parish's Sunday collection. Our collections are better, so our goal is higher. I am going to suggest that if everyone who could afford it, would pledge or donate \$100, even if you gave it over a 10 month period, we would make our goal. As I said, we will need a few significant donations to compensate for those who can't donate very much. I hope everyone will pledge or give something, even if it's \$5 or \$10. In Archbishop Schnurr's letter, there is 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. These many services in our Archdiocese and to the poor in our neighborhoods deserve whatever support we can give. Thank you for your patient listening.

5th Sunday of Lent - B Cycle

March 25, 2012

INTRODUCTION: [Jeremiah 31,31-35; Hebrews 5,7-9; John 12,20-33]

The prophet Jeremiah lived 600 years before Christ. He was sent by God to mercifully warn God's people that they were living on the edge of catastrophe. If they didn't start following God's

ways, the Babylonians would invade their land and destroy them. Centuries of wanton idolatry and social injustice had seriously demoralized and weakened God's people. If they followed what God was telling them through Jeremiah, they could avoid disaster. Of course, they ignored Jeremiah and punished him for his message. Today's first reading comes shortly before the Babylonian invasion. God speaks, through Jeremiah, that he is gravely disappointed with the way God's people continually violated the covenant they made with God at Mt. Sinai, a covenant Moses solemnly sealed in blood centuries earlier. In spite of their unfaithfulness, God still loved his people and would make a new covenant with them. Six hundred years later, Jesus used these words "new covenant" when he gave the cup of his blood to his disciples at the Last Supper. We renew that covenant with him each time we come to Mass.

HOMILY: Today's gospel is from John chapter 12, verses 20 to 33. If you would look at verse 1 of this chapter, John tells us it was six days before Passover and Jesus had just arrived in Bethany. Bethany is a little town located on the Mount of Olives just across the Kidron valley from Jerusalem. Just as thousands of other Jews were doing, Jesus was going there to celebrate Passover that year. That year Passover began on Friday evening, so six days before meant Jesus arrived in Bethany sometime on Saturday. Some of his friends, including Martha, Mary, and Lazarus, prepared a dinner for him - not necessarily at their home. It would have to have been a big dinner - remember Jesus had 12 apostles with him. Lazarus, some time before as you know, had been raised from the dead by Jesus, an event that led many Jews to believe in Jesus. While at this dinner, Mary anointed Jesus' feet with expensive perfume. Judas registered a complaint that the gesture was wasteful and the perfume should have been sold so the proceeds could have been given to the poor. Judas, John tells us, was the treasurer for the group. He didn't care for the poor but would steal from the money with which he had been entrusted. Jesus told Judas to "leave her alone. She did it in preparation for my burial." Indeed, Jesus would be buried before the week was over.

John tells us that the next day, which would have been the first day of the week, news got around that Jesus was going into Jerusalem just a couple of miles from where he was in Bethany. When a crowd heard he was going into the city, they met him with palm branches singing "Hosanna. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." The Pharisees remarked to each other: "We cannot win! Look the whole world has gone after him." Although we won't commemorate Palm Sunday until next week, I wanted to mention this because the anointing at Bethany and the triumphal entry into Jerusalem immediately preceded today's gospel and are connected with it, especially the theme of Jesus' death. After the Pharisees commented that the whole world has gone after him, John tells us it's true. Some Greeks showed up wanting to see Jesus and that's where today's gospel begins.

Most scripture scholars believe that it was after Jesus entered Jerusalem on this occasion that he drove the merchants and money-changers out of the Temple. That's where Matthew, Mark and Luke place the cleansing of the temple in their gospels. But John had already told us about that incident earlier in his gospel, so he does not mention it here. Instead, when these Greek worshippers sought to see Jesus, Jesus saw this as a sign that his hour had come. "Hour" is a key word in John. It described the time he would complete his mission here on earth. It was the

time when he would be put to death for faithfully fulfilling his work of teaching, healing, forgiving sins and spreading God's love. It was the time when Jesus would be raised up, both on the cross and in the resurrection, a time when God would manifest to the utmost his presence in his Son.

Today's gospel is Jesus' own reflection on his death. Being human it is not something he wants to go through. "I am troubled now," he says. The Greek word used here does not mean something like a mother telling her children "I am troubled when you don't come when I call you." The Greek word means to experience inward turmoil, to be stirred up, disturbed, unsettled, thrown into confusion. He wonders aloud if he should say: "Father, save me from this hour." If he escaped or ran away, he would abandon all that he had done and all he came to do and his good works would be forgotten forever. He had to face this hour so that he could be glorified and God would be glorified in him. Here the word "glory" does not mean Jesus was looking for human praise. "Glory" in the scriptures means a special revelation of God's presence. It means that he would save us through his death, resurrection and ascension. Jesus gave us an example to help us understand how his death would lead to our salvation. Like a seed must die in order to produce a new growth, so through Jesus' death, resurrection and return to the Father new life would come forth in those who have followed him. He tells us, "where I am, there also will my servant be." We will all face death, but following him involves another kind of death, death to selfishness and sin, and maybe even martyrdom. But death to ourselves will lead to life eternal. As Jesus prays for the strength to get through the ordeal ahead and thus give glory to the Father by fulfilling his mission, God the Father's voice is heard. The Father's words give testimony about Jesus. The gospel ends on a note of hope for this will be a time of judgment for the world. This means it will look as if evil has won with Jesus' death. But Christ's glorification will put an end to the power of evil in this world. (Incidentally I read once this is the idea behind April fools day: it's association with Easter. When Jesus rose, the devil, who thought he got rid of Jesus, was made to look a fool.) Evil will not triumph. Jesus will win in the end. We need to keep this optimism in trying times and know that in Jesus is our hope and our life. Amen.