

Trinity Sunday - B Cycle

June 3, 2012

INTRODUCTION - As far back in history as we know, humans have believed in divine beings whom they considered to be either friendly or hostile to us humans. Forms of worship developed to please those divine beings who were friendly or to protect oneself from those who were unfriendly. Some cultures had hundreds of such divine beings. Can you imagine having to be concerned about each one of these powerful entities without getting on the wrong side of any one of them. Polytheism (the worship of many gods) was practiced everywhere. Abraham and his descendants were an exception to the rule. Abraham may have acknowledged there were many other gods in many other places, such as Egypt or Babylon, but for him, there was only one God that mattered for him, one God that he worshipped. Just a footnote: about 500 years after Abraham, one of the pharaohs, Akhenaten, the father of the famous King Tut, outlawed polytheism and declared only Aten, the sun god, was to be worshipped. His son, King Tut, returned to the practice of polytheism.

This is a little story which I have told before. It gives something of a preview how Abraham would change the practice of many nations from polytheism to monotheism. This story is not in the Bible. It's found in Jewish and Islamic literature. When Abraham was young he lived with his parents in Ur (an area in southern Iraq). Abraham's father made his living by making statues of the gods people worshipped in that area - and there were lots of gods (over 700 of them archeologists tell us) so he must have had a good business going. One day Abraham's father had to go on a business trip and he left Abraham in charge of the shop. Abraham felt disgusted with all those statues of gods and goddesses and broke them all - except for one he left standing in the corner of the shop. When his father came home and saw that all his statues were destroyed, he blamed Abraham and scolded him for it. Abraham denied doing it. He pointed to the god standing in the corner and said, "he did it."

In today's first reading, we hear Moses giving some last minute instructions to God's people before they enter the Promised Land. He tells them there is no other God than the Lord (Yahweh) and that only by being faithful to their God will they prosper. It's still good advice for today's world where polytheism and paganism have been replaced by atheism, hedonism and materialism.

HOMILY - I said in my introduction that Abraham and his descendants were an exception to the polytheism all around them. That's only partly true. Up until the Babylonian Exile, the Jews were often seduced into the worship of pagan gods while they continued to worship the God of Abraham. The first commandment "I am the Lord thy God, thou shalt not have strange gods before me" did not prevent the Jews giving in to the attractions of the gods of Canaan; for example, fertility gods who were honored by sacred prostitution and human sacrifice. It wasn't until the Babylonian Exile in 587 B.C. that the Jews finally began to get the message, that their God was the only God and there was no other. From that time the Jews remained loyal to the worship of their one God, in spite of a brief period in history when they were persecuted by the

Greeks for refusing to worship Greek gods.

At the time of Jesus, the Jews were fiercely loyal to their own God. Jesus was a major challenge to what they believed. Jesus didn't show up saying I am God's Son so you must worship me too. The way he spoke and the things he did showed the power of God at work in him. He forgave sins, which was something only God could do; with authority he interpreted God's Law; he healed the sick and cast out demons; he could foretell the future; and he had power over nature - calming a storm, feeding a multitude, walking on water. He called God by the very intimate term, Abba, a term a son or daughter would use for father. He was ultimately put to death for the sin of blasphemy, claiming (or at least not denying) that he was the Christ (Messiah) the Son of the Blessed One. Then there was the ultimate miracle of his resurrection. Many wondered how he could be God's Son, which would make him divine, since there is only one God. For 300 years people tried to figure out Jesus, whether he is Son of God, whether he is some very unique person as the Arians claimed, whether he is a blasphemer. At the Council of Nicea (in modern day Turkey), after many heresies, war and much bloodshed, it was officially declared that Jesus is one in essence with God the Father, that Jesus is God but not the same person as the Father. Add to this Jesus' and Paul's teaching on the Holy Spirit and we have three divine persons, equal in power and majesty and yet united as one God. Thus we have the term Trinity, coined by Tertullian who lived around the year 200 and adopted by the council of Nicea in 325. We profess the Creed of Nicea every Sunday. Because it was such a fiercely debated topic, the major portion of the Creed focuses on Jesus.

I have tried only to explain how the mystery came to be revealed, not how it can be. Yet we should not be surprised or dismayed that it is impossible for us to understand God. To fully understand God we would have to be as great as God, and we're not. We continue to discover mysteries about ourselves and nature all the time. There's still a lot we don't know. God gave us this knowledge because God wants us to know him, which is what lovers tend to do. So it's in love that God wants us to know him. Some day we will see for ourselves there is one God and that in God there are three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. That is what faith is all about.

The Body and Blood of Christ - B Cycle

June 10, 2012

INTRODUCTION: Our first reading is from the second book in the Bible, the Book of Exodus. The setting is in the desert of Sinai. God had just set his people free from their slavery in Egypt and Moses, as their leader, was bringing them to the Promised Land. Historically all this takes us back to the time of Ramses II, about 1250 to 1300 years before Christ. Today's first reading is one of the most important passages in the Old Testament. It tells us how God made a covenant with this rag-tag collection of ex-slaves, a solemn pact by which they would be his special people. In the covenant he promised them his special love and protection. We all know what promises the people made to God: we call them the Ten Commandments. Every facet of

this reading is important, but as you will see from the other readings, today's liturgy focuses on the theme of blood. To make the covenant binding, Moses called for the sacrifice of young bulls. Half the blood from the sacrifice he sprinkled on the altar which represented God and the other half he sprinkled on the people. Blood was a symbol of life for the Jews. God and the people were thus bound together in a most solemn and serious bond. This covenant defined the Jews for centuries and much of the rest of the Bible pretty much describes the history of how God's people were either faithful or unfaithful to this covenant and the consequences that resulted from their fidelity or infidelity. Each day in prayer they recalled their special relationship with God and each year they solemnly celebrated this in the feast of Passover. Eventually the feast of Pentecost became a celebration of this covenant too.

The second reading from the Letter to the Hebrews assumes the recipients of this Letter knows all about the Jewish feast of Yom Kippur, the day of Atonement. After all, the letter is written to the Hebrews. Let me explain it for a few moments because you may not be very familiar with the Yom Kippur liturgy - which was very complex. I'm only going to explain the part of the liturgy that is relevant to today's second reading. Yom Kippur was the one day of the year that the High Priest was allowed to enter the Holy of Holies where the Arc of the Covenant was kept (until the Babylonians destroyed the Temple - then what happened to the Arc, no one knows). When the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies, he sprinkled the top of the Arc of the Covenant (called the mercy-seat), with the blood of animals that had been sacrificed. Here blood, which symbolized life, substituted for the sinful people who sought cleansing and reconciliation with God. It is as if the sinner laid down his or her life before God asking for his mercy through the blood of sacrificial animals. Assuming the reader knew all this, the Letter to the Hebrews tells us how Jesus entered into the eternal sanctuary, the highest heaven, the abode of God. Jesus entered with his own blood that he shed for us for the forgiveness of sins, an eternal and perfect sacrifice.

HOMILY: I said earlier the focus is on blood and how it was used by Moses to enact a covenant, binding the Jewish people to God and God to his people. That covenant was broken many times in the history of God's people, so much so that about 700 years later, God spoke through his prophet Jeremiah that he would make a new covenant with his people. "It will not be like the covenant I made with their fathers... for they broke my covenant and I had to show myself their master...this is the covenant which I will make...says the Lord, I will place my law within them and write it upon their hearts; I will be their God and they shall be my people...All, from least to greatest, shall know me, says the Lord, for I will forgive their evildoing and remember their sin no more." (Jer. 31, 31-34)

When he gave them the cup to drink from and told them: "this is my blood of the covenant...", the Apostles would have been shocked. Jews could never, under any circumstances, drink blood or eat any meat with blood in it. Now Jesus tells them to drink it. The meaning would not have been lost on them: they were entering into a new covenant with Jesus and ultimately with God; they would be bound together in a relationship in which they would share in God's life - a relationship in which they would become a new creation and be purified of their sinfulness.

None of the gospel writers mention any of the special foods at the paschal meal they were celebrating. The focus is all on Jesus and the bread he gave, which he pronounced was his body, and the cup of wine, which he pronounced was his blood. After his death and resurrection, it gave them a way to remain united with him and he with them.

The Church teaches us that the bread and wine are truly changed and that we receive the whole Christ, the risen Christ, whether under the appearance of bread or wine. But we are reminded of the fuller meaning of our union with him and our covenant with him when we receive under both forms. We only advise people not to receive from the cup if they have a cold or sore throat.

Today is the feast of the Body and Blood of Christ. It is one of the biggest challenges Catholics have today because our culture seems not to believe something is real unless we see it for ourselves. However, with faith we can't use the motto: "seeing is believing." We have to reverse that motto to: "Believing is seeing," for if we take on faith what Jesus said, we will someday see it to be true. If you don't think Jesus made himself clear about the Eucharist, read the sixth chapter of John. We will read that chapter starting the last week of July and all through August. It's one of the most beautiful chapters in the gospels and it is something you don't want to miss.

11th Sunday in Ordinary Time - B Cycle

June 17, 2012

INTRODUCTION: Our first reading comes from the prophet Ezekiel. Ezekiel loved to use symbolism, either spoken or acted out, in order to get his message across. In today's reading he talks about trees. The first image is that God would take a cutting from a tree and plant it in Israel where it would grow into a majestic tree. This prophecy comes at the time of the Babylonian exile. Jerusalem's king and the leading citizens of Israel were captured by the Babylonians and taken off to Babylon. The king's sons were executed. It appeared to be the end of the Davidic monarchy. But God would raise up a future king from the house of David. This is the meaning of the topmost branch of the tree that God would take and replant in Israel. By this symbol, God was telling his people he was not giving up on them. Then other trees are mentioned. God brings low the high tree and lifts high the lowly tree. It is God who humbles the proud and mighty (Babylon and Egypt) and raises up the lowly. It is a message of hope to a people in despair and is meant to give God's people courage as they patiently wait for God to act on their behalf.

HOMILY: Today, I have a few one-liners in honor of our fathers. A mother brought her little four year-old son to the card store and told him to pick out a Fathers' Day card for his dad. He kept picking out cards and putting them back. She said, "can't you find one that you like." He said, "I'm looking for one with money in it." A little girl asked her dad, "why do you brag about wearing the pants in the family when it is mom who always tells you which pair to put on." One day a grandfather was visiting his family and his little grandchild asked him, "Can you croak like a

frog?" Grandfather said, "I think I can do that. Why?" The little grandchild answered, "well dad said when you croak we're all going to Disneyland." A father was talking with his buddy about his kids. He said, "ever since my son was little I've been trying to teach him the value of a dollar. Now that he has begun to understand, he wants his allowance in gold." It's been just a little over 100 years since Father's day was first celebrated, but it took until 1972 for Congress to make it official. I am guessing it took so long because it was probably too difficult an item for Congress to handle. Some things just take time. It's what our gospel teaches us today.

Today we have two parables of Jesus from St. Mark. The first is about how seed grows and how the farmer has to patiently wait for it. This reminds us how, in our spiritual lives, we have to do some of the work. The farmer has to prepare the soil, plant the seed, keep the weeds down, maybe even fertilize it and water it, but we have to depend on God to do what we can't do. We have to be patient for God to do his part. St. Augustine said it so well: "we have to work as if everything depended on us and pray as if everything depended on God." We need God's help if we hope to be part of God's kingdom (which is what the parable is ultimately about). We remember Jesus told us, "without me you can do nothing."

The second parable about the mustard seed shows us that if we are patient and do depend on God, great things will take place. This parable connects with the first reading about the small branch of the cedar tree that grew into a majestic tree. Someone pointed out that if in 1965 you bought McDonald's stock for \$22.50 and had purchased 100 shares, today it would be worth nearly 6 million dollars. Not bad. Consider the Church. Jesus began it with 12 men and a handful of faithful followers. Today it has grown to 1.2 billion members. That's pretty impressive too.

This past week I finished our next book for our book club entitled Flunkin' Sainthood. The author, Jana Riess, who will be with us at our next meeting, tells how she tried a variety of spiritual practices, devoting herself to each one for an entire month. For example, she fasted faithfully for a month, (she picked February for her time to fast because it is the shortest month), then she worked on contemplation, then being generous, being grateful, living the Sabbath like the Jews, praying the divine office, etc. She claims she failed each one - yet the overall effect of her efforts made a big difference in her attitude and in her life. By the end of the year, she had a greater peace and a new-found ability to forgive - especially her father who abandoned her family when she was young. Comparing her experience to today's gospel, she planted a few seeds herself. She felt many did not take root, but the ones that did brought her abundant blessings. Besides being quite humorous, her book was a good illustration of today's gospel. Briefly, Jesus tells us don't try to be holy without his help, have a lot of patience with yourself and with God's working, and expect great blessings if you do what you can do to get closer to God. Amen.

Birth of John the Baptist - C Cycle

June 24, 2012

INTRODUCTION: We are familiar with John the Baptist from the readings during Advent. John was the prophet who immediately preceded Jesus and foretold his coming. John's birthday usually falls on a weekday, but it is considered such an important feast that when it falls on Sunday, it takes precedence over the Sunday readings. If you are curious why the feast of his birth is today, consider this. The feast of the Annunciation is celebrated on March 25. When the archangel Gabriel appeared to Mary, the archangel told her that her cousin Elizabeth was already in her sixth month. So add three months to March 25 and we are at June 25. (Since John's birthday is the 24th - he must have come a day early).

The liturgy usually puts the feast day of saints on the day they died and entered into eternal life. But there are only three birthdays. This is because their birth is considered especially holy since they were born free from any sin.

[eve] - Our first reading is from Jeremiah, a prophet who lived 600 years before Christ. As God was telling Jeremiah he was to be a prophet, the reading describes that role. This description of a prophet fits John the Baptist as well.

The gospel is the annunciation to John's father, the old priest Zechariah, that he and his elderly wife would have a child, a special child who would prepare God's people for the coming of the Messiah.

[morning] - In today's first reading, the prophet Second Isaiah, who lived about 500 years before Christ, speaks of some mysterious person who was identified simply as God's servant. This poem and three others in Isaiah's writings are known as Servant Songs. The early Church found these songs described Jesus in a most uncanny way. They are usually read during Holy Week. Today, however, the liturgy applies this second of the Servant Songs to John the Baptist because it states: "the Lord called me from birth, from my mother's womb he gave me my name."

When the archangel Gabriel had appeared to John's father Zachariah nine months earlier, he told him his wife Elizabeth would have a son and he was to be named John. Zachariah and Elizabeth were a very old couple and Zachariah didn't believe the angel. Not smart! He lost the ability to speak because of his lack of faith. (It's like the angel was telling him, "keep your mouth shut and your lack of faith to yourself.") Once Zachariah gave his child the name he had been told to name him, he showed he fully accepted all that the angel told him and his ability to speak returned.

HOMILY: Since I gave a long introduction, I do not have a very long sermon. One of Aesop's most famous fables is the story of the ant and the grasshopper.

The story goes like this:

In a field one summer's day, a Grasshopper was hopping about, chirping and singing to its heart's content. An Ant passed by, bearing along with great toil a kernel of corn he was taking to the nest. "Why not come and chat with me," said the Grasshopper, "instead of toiling and moiling in that way?" "I am helping to lay up food for the winter," said the Ant, "and recommend you to do the same." "Why bother about winter?" said the Grasshopper; we have got plenty of food at present." The Ant went on its way and continued its toil. When the winter came, the Grasshopper had no food and found itself dying of hunger, while it saw the ants distributing corn and grain from the stores they had collected in the summer. Then the Grasshopper knew: "It is best to prepare for the days of necessity."

Even 2500 years ago, people knew the importance of preparing for the future. It's still just as true today. If we do not learn this lesson when life is good, we'll learn the hard way when it's too late. This goes for education, investing, health and all kinds of important areas of life. John the Baptist's role in life was to insist on the need to prepare. He called people to repent and prepare for the coming of God's kingdom. His message is as important today as it ever was. There is a kind of new age theology that follows the attitude of the Grasshopper. It says don't worry. Everybody is going to be in heaven in the end (except for someone like Hitler). Although God wants all people to be saved, there are abundant passages in the Scriptures that warn us that we cannot take salvation for granted. Jesus, who came to save us and who revealed to us so clearly the love of God, warned us: "The door to heaven is narrow. Work hard to get in, because many will try to enter and will not be able." (Luke 13,23) Jesus' message at the beginning of his ministry was the same message as John the Baptist: "repent and believe in the gospel." The word "believe" means more than saying, "I believe." It means putting our belief into action. Statistics keep coming out that fewer and fewer people are coming to Church, which is an indication that more and more people believe that worship of God is not all that important. I think it's the entitlement mentality. We feel entitled to be happy (even eternally), no matter what we do or how we live. That's not what the Scriptures tell us. I think the most important lesson we can learn from this feast of John the Baptist is to prepare. The fact you are here today is one good sign that you understand we need to prepare to meet our God. Amen.