

Fourteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time - B Cycle July 5, 2015

INTRODUCTION – *Ezekiel 2, 2-5; II Cor. 12, 7-10; Mark 6, 1-6*

Sometimes prophets predicted the future, but most of the time their task was to remind God's people of how God wanted them to live. Their efforts were not always appreciated by the people who heard the message. The prophet Ezekiel lived about 600 years before Christ. He had to warn the people of the national disaster that was headed their way if they did not change their ways. In the beginning of his book, he describes, as much as it is possible, a vision of God in heaven. He was so overwhelmed he fell flat onto the ground. This is where our first reading comes in. God got him back on his feet and commissioned him to be a prophet. God cautions Ezekiel that as a prophet he would not have an easy job of it. The passage prepares us for the gospel that tells of Jesus, the greatest prophet of all, who was rejected by his own people when he came to preach in his hometown of Nazareth.

HOMILY – My homily is in two parts: on freedom and on the gospel. This weekend we celebrate our freedom. As we know from history, freedom is not a gift that's simply given to us. It is something we had to work for and even fight for. That's because freedom is something more complex than the simple notion many people have about freedom today. Many of the problems we experience in society today come from a misguided notion of freedom. Too many people think freedom means they should be able to have or do anything they want. This is a recipe for chaos and anarchy. The first thing we need to know about freedom is that in the use of my freedom, I have to be considerate of the freedom of others. For example, I have the right and the freedom to go out for a drive, but so do other people. In my freedom or in my hurry to get somewhere I can't push other people off the road. The irony about freedom is that the more we use freedom to justify serving our own wants and needs, the more we are likely to become a slave to our own basic self-centeredness. We all know people who have allowed freedom to lead them into becoming slaves to their own pride, envy, laziness, lust, avarice, gluttony, and anger, not to mention a variety of other addictions that can enslave us. True freedom requires us to acknowledge our creator who has endowed us with freedom and who has given us a path that will help us maintain that freedom. Or as Jesus said: "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and truth will set you free." Jesus is telling us only freedom that is based on following him (being his disciple) is a freedom that is true. (Jn 8, 31-32) When God led his people out of Egypt, thus releasing them from their cruel slavery, he didn't tell them now you are free, you can go and do whatever you want. He said believe in me, worship me, keep my commandments and then you will prosper. Freedom under God, not freedom from God, is what our hearts truly long for, for our greatest joy and fulfillment is love for God.

Now I would like to shift over to the gospel. When Jesus stepped out of his role as the son of a carpenter and started preaching and working miracles, he shook up a lot of people. He didn't favorably impress the Jewish leaders because their own freedom to do whatever they wanted in interpreting God's law was at stake. He didn't favorably impress the people of his own village of Nazareth, a village of maybe 1600 to 2000 people. I would suspect he and his family were known by everyone. I do not believe he was from a desperately poor family; after all he was a craftsman and a lot of construction was going on in that part of Galilee. To make the argument that the holy family had sufficient resources to support themselves, I can add that the holy family could take time off to go to Jerusalem for Passover every year (Lk. 2,42). This means Joseph was not a day laborer; he could afford to take a week or so off every year. However, a craftsman was in a class considerably lower than those who were in the educated class. The

people of the village knew this for when he began to teach on the Sabbath they asked: “where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands? Is this not the carpenter, the Son of Mary, etc.” (Mk. 6,2-3) This same question comes up in John. When the people of Jerusalem hear him teach, they asked: “How did this fellow get his education...” (Jn 7,15) His answer was “it comes from him who sent me.” (Jn.7,16)

You would think that his friends and neighbors in this little village would have been proud of him, but what Jesus was doing was not their tradition. They were slaves to their tradition (remember Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof*). Their tradition was like a class system and Jesus was moving into a higher class than that to which he was entitled by birth. The class he was moving into was the educated class. Now, there was no public education system, except for what a child might pick up in the synagogue on the Sabbath. Otherwise it was home schooling for everyone. A girl would learn how to keep house and be a mother while a boy was expected to learn whatever skills his father could teach him so he could support a family. Not only was Jesus stepping out of his class, he was expecting the people of Nazareth to accept his teachings and put their faith in him. Here he was, speaking for God, speaking as a prophet, as one sent by God to teach and to heal, while their previous knowledge of him, the category they had placed him in, kept them from accepting him.

So Jesus speaks the famous line, a line my father loved to say about himself, “prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.” (Mk. 6,4) His own people could not see him as a prophet. We know, however, some of his family later on did end up following him and believing in him. As for my dad. I recognize now I missed out on a lot of wisdom he could have shared with us if I had listened. Sometimes we’re too smart for our own good. Let us pray on this day that a distorted sense of freedom does not lead us to think that we’re smart enough to ignore the wisdom and the freedom Jesus came to bring us. Amen.

Fifteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time – B Cycle July 12, 2015

INTRODUCTION – (Amos 7, 12-15; Ephesians 1, 3-10; Mark 6, 7-13)

Our first reading today comes from the prophet Amos. Amos lived about 700 years before Christ. By that time, the Kingdom of God had been divided into two kingdoms. His prophetic message was to the northern kingdom that they would soon be destroyed unless the people reformed their lives. His message of reform was not well received. No one likes to be told that they are not living the way God wants them to live. In understanding today’s passage, it helps to know that at that time there were professional prophets; that is, some people made their living by telling people how to solve their problems, giving them advice, predicting the future, etc. These professional prophets were often servants of pagan gods - not servants of the God of Abraham. They usually spoke the kinds of things their clients would want to hear because if they offended or rebuked their client, they would not have been paid their fee. Amos preached at the sanctuary in Bethel where there was a temple in competition with the Temple in Jerusalem. The high priest in Bethel, Amaziah, mistook Amos for one of the professional prophets and told him to go back to Jerusalem where he came from. Amos protested that he was not a career prophet. He patiently explained that he was living a nice peaceful life as a farmer and God called him to go to Bethel and warn the people that their sinful lives would lead to destruction. Today’s passage prepares us for the gospel where Jesus sends his apostles out to preach and warns them that their message will not always be well received.

HOMILY: I'm sure most people know by now that Fr. Lammeier passed away this past Monday. We had been blest by Fr. Lammeier's willingness to help us here for the past 15 years. He wrote in his will his (quote) "request that the homilist talk on 'death' or the priesthood. Please no eulogy. There is not an awful lot of good that can be said, and I would want the homily to be a little longer than that." (unquote). Contrary to his quoted comments, there is an awful lot of good that could be said. He was a very humble man, highly respected, had a good sense of humor, worked hard on his homilies and described himself as a simple priest who said his prayers and did his work. He influenced many people by his wisdom, whether they were the archbishops he served as administrative secretary, Archbishops Leibold and Bernardin, or whether he was ministering to the ordinary parishioner who came to him with a question or to confession on Saturday afternoon. I know that he enjoyed helping out here and he enjoyed the people he met here. Several times I invited him to live here and about two years ago, he accepted my offer, primarily because he could no longer stay by himself. Last fall he had to move to a nursing home because he could no longer walk. I saw him last Saturday and he looked fine, except he complained about his sciatica causing him a great deal of pain. Last Monday he got up, concelebrated Mass at the nursing home (which meant so much to him). As the day went on he kept declining until he passed away. Often when people visited him, instead of saying "goodbye" he always said "try to be nice." I am sure if he were here physically right now, his last words would not be "goodbye" but he would say to us: "try to be nice." It's a good imperative for all of us to follow.

In our gospel today, Jesus began to send his apostles out to heal the sick, to preach repentance and to expel demons. Notice how Mark words this: he "began to send them out" implying that he will continue to do so, and he does, even today. Fr. Lammeier was certainly one of those who generously and unselfishly gave himself to that ministry. Another person who has served the Church and who has served us with an abundance of generosity and competence is Carol Roosa. (She has retired as business manager as most of you know.) Carol has been a great blessing to me and to St. Boniface. For the past couple of years she has been coaching her daughter, Jenni, and preparing her to take over as business manager. Jenni is a very competent young lady and I am sure she will do a fantastic job.

Let us consider another idea that is important in today's gospel, an idea we should take home with us. Jesus tells those he sent out to travel light, just wearing the clothes on their back. In Mark's gospel they were permitted to also have a staff and sandals. They didn't need a lot of stuff because they needed to learn to depend on God for food and for a place to sleep. We don't have to go to that extreme, but truth is, most of us could get by with fewer things. I think the most important lesson buried in today's gospel is not how much stuff we have, but how much stuff fills our calendars. We keep ourselves so busy that we never have time to pray or too often prayer gets dumped at the end of the day. When we get to the end of the day, we're too tired. That's something I have to struggle with too. We may not be called to go out and preach and heal and expel demons, but we are all called to holiness, and we can't get holy unless we pray. Think about it as you are putting together your "to do" list. Does prayer have a place on it? Thank you for taking the time to be here today to honor our Lord and Creator in prayer. Amen.

Sixteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time July 19, 2015

(Jeremiah, 23, 1-6; Ephesians, 2, 13-18; Mk. 6, 30-34)

INTRODUCTION: Our first reading comes from Jeremiah the prophet who lived during the years of the Babylonian conquest and exile of Israel, about 600 years before Christ. In this passage, Jeremiah is speaking to the Jewish kings and leaders of his day. He refers to them as shepherds, an image that goes back to around the time of Abraham hundreds of years before Jeremiah. Jeremiah denounces the Jewish kings and leaders as useless and evil shepherds who cared only about themselves. It was their failure to guide God's people in God's ways that led to the Babylonian exile and the destruction of many people, the nation, and the Temple. In today's passage, God promises he himself would make sure that good shepherds would take over and caring for his people. However, God's promise that "the days are coming" took a long time to come; not just the 50 years of exile in Babylon, but 600 years before the king would arrive who would govern wisely and who would save Judah. We hear about this king in today's gospel, a good shepherd who guides hundreds and thousands of people who flock to him looking for wisdom and guidance. Notice the emphasis on the concept that he guides them by his teaching. Unfortunately, our history tells us his own people eventually turned away from him, but he continues to be shepherd for millions of people from all over the world.

HOMILY: The apostles have been busy. Last week we heard that Jesus had sent them out to preach repentance, to cast out demons and to heal the sick. Jesus warned them that their mission could be difficult, they might be rejected or worse. It must have been a good experience for it sounds as if they came back to Jesus very excited about their experience. But they were tired too. Jesus recognizes that and, like the good shepherd that he is, he suggests they take some time to rest to regain their energy. It doesn't work. A big crowd of people figured out where he was headed and were waiting for him by the time Jesus and the apostles got there. We do not know who all these people were, people who dropped everything, not even thinking about their next meal, so they could see and hear Jesus. My suspicion is these were people from the neighboring villages which the apostles had just visited. I had always felt that Jesus didn't send the Apostles off on a far trip since it was their first try at evangelizing.

Jesus, who had intended to be a good shepherd for his Apostles in giving them a little time to rest, now becomes a good shepherd for these people, recognizing their need for good leadership. St. Mark tells us they were like sheep without a shepherd and Jesus was touched by their needs and he reached out to help them. I think it's really significant to notice how he chose to help them. The gospel tells us "he began to teach them many things." We're told in the other gospels he healed many who were sick and then, because it was late, he made sure they all (5000 of them) got a full meal. The mention of the meal gets us ahead of ourselves and I want to stick with the passage we just heard – especially the last verse which tells us Jesus' "heart was moved with pity for them, for they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things."

I am sure religion classes in grade school, high school, perhaps college or perhaps the RCIA have been part of our educational training. It's really easy, when we get out of school, to think now I know enough. I remember when I taught religion in high school. If I went over some material that the students were taught in grade school, they really complained about it. With a

rebellious tone they informed me “we don’t need to learn about this, we learned this in grade school.” Of all the saints I have ever read about, not one of them thought they knew enough about Christ. Every one of them continued to learn more and more about Christ and about their faith through prayer, through readings, through sermons, through conversations, through learning how to practice it better and through any way they could (even through suffering). When we reach the pearly gate, God’s not going to bring us a second grade test to see if we can pass it; God’s going to look at us to see how holy we’ve become. Everyone’s vocation is holiness.

In the responsorial psalm today we prayed Psalm 23, the best known and probably best loved of all 150 psalms. It looks at life the way sheep would look at it and it tells us what great blessings God has for us.

The idea I want to leave with you is that the teaching of Jesus is the door to that paradise God promises us. Here are the steps that will get us there. Letting ourselves be taught by him allows us to get to know him. That’s just like any good teacher who may have influenced us along the way. The more we know him, the more we want to get to know him. The more we get to know him, the more we discover that we love him. It is in that loving relationship with him that we will enjoy the blessings we hear about in Psalm 23. Letting Jesus teach us, through prayer, through readings, through sermons, through conversations, through practicing our faith better and through any way possible (even suffering) is the first step to the fullness of life that he came to offer us. Amen.

Seventeenth Sunday of Ordinary Time July 26, 2015

I suspect only a few people may have noticed that today’s gospel came from John. We have been following Mark’s gospel this year, and in Mark’s gospel we have come to the account of Jesus feeding a multitude of 5000 men. (Women and children might at least double that number.) Mark’s description of the feeding of the multitude is very brief, whereas, John’s account leads into a lengthy and beautiful discourse on Jesus as the bread of life. Thus our readings have switched over to John for a few weeks.

Imagine yourself as part of that huge crowd when Jesus and the apostles start passing out food. You would surely ask yourself or someone nearby: What is happening? Where is all this food coming from? Would you be impressed? Impressed enough to remember that it happened? The early followers of Jesus were impressed enough to tell the story over and over – to such an extent that it is the only miracle found in all four gospels, and in Matthew and Mark there are two accounts of the miracle. Scholars think it is most probably a different version or rendition of the same event.

The gospels do not tell us how Jesus worked this miracle. But if you stop and think about it, there are only about one or two miracles where the gospels describe how Jesus did it, like maybe when he put mud on the eyes of the man born blind (Jn. 9) or put his finger into the ears of the deaf mute person. Most of the time, however, Jesus just healed a person with a word or with the touch of his hand. Somehow, Jesus fed all the people along with having lots of food left over. If a person doesn’t accept this was miraculous, then they probably would not accept any of the miracles Jesus worked. They would decide according to their own whim what is and what isn’t historical about the gospels.

Jesus' concern for the people was described in last week's gospel which told us "his heart was moved with pity for them, for they were like sheep without a shepherd." Just as God miraculously fed his people in the desert when he rescued them from slavery in Egypt, so now he feeds them again. It shows God cares about our most basic needs and will help us if we go to him. Sometimes we think we can handle everything all by ourselves and we don't need his help, but we do. We can't let ourselves forget the famous line Jesus spoke at the Last Supper: "without me you can do nothing." (Jn. 5,15) We know we do not always get what we ask for, but we have to trust that we will get what God thinks is best for us. No prayer is ever wasted. On the other hand, we also can't let ourselves forget, that although Jesus can and does step in when we need his help, he also expects us to reach out and help one another. Who knows, if a person is in need, God may have chosen to use us. We might be the exact answer to someone else's prayers when we reach out. When God chooses to use us, we can do great things, just as, with Jesus' help, the little food the boy in the gospel offered was enough to feed a multitude of people.

The hungry people in the world do depend on those who have been more generously blessed to share some of their blessings. Thus we have mission collections, the St. Vincent de Paul, Churches Active in Northside, Catholic Relief Services, food stamps and an almost infinite number of charitable and government organizations that help the poor. I'm not going to try to solve the problem of world hunger today. I just mention this so no one thinks: "well if Jesus can feed all those hungry people, why should I give out my hard earned money. I'll go to tonight's game instead. Let Jesus feed them."

Jesus did not come to hand out fish sandwiches. He did come to teach us to "love one another." If he wanted to hand out food all day, he would have allowed the people to make him their king. We might think Jesus would have found it flattering if everyone wanted him to be their king, to have people bowing to him, getting people to do whatever he wanted a little more easily. But in the gospel, their wanting him to be their king was a kind of rejection of Jesus. It was a rejection in that the people didn't want to accept him on his terms. They wanted to accept him on their terms. Their terms were that he would always be around to meet all their needs, especially their political needs: independence from the Romans and sending the Romans back to Italy. Jesus had a different agenda than being the people's king. He wants to meet our needs but in a different way than giving everyone whatever they want. He wants to feed us with the bread of life, eternal life. St. John in his gospel refers to this miracle of feeding the multitude as a "sign." Like any sign it points to something else. We will hear a lot about the meaning of this sign in the next few weeks.