

## Tenth Sunday in Ordinary Time – C Cycle June 5, 2016

**INTRODUCTION:** (*1 Kings 17,17-24; Galatians 1,11-19; Luke 7,11-17*)

860 years before Christ, there existed two kingdoms in Israel - the northern and the southern Kingdom. In the northern Kingdom, there ruled a king named Ahab whose queen was the infamous Jezebel. These two tried to destroy the Jewish religion and pressed their subjects into paganism. Thus most people in the northern Kingdom worshipped the pagan gods - a worship that involved human sacrifice and considered debauchery sacred. Alive at this period of time was Elijah - one of the greatest prophets in the Old Testament. Of course, the king and queen came into conflict with Elijah. To prove that those who practiced paganism were wrong and the God of their ancestors was the true God and creator of all things, Elijah decreed that there would be drought and famine over the entire Middle East. When this happened, to escape the anger and threats of Ahab and Jezebel, Elijah fled Israel to what is today southern Lebanon near Tyre and Sidon. God led Elijah to the home of a widow for whom God provided a miraculous abundance of food for the prophet, the widow, and her son. While Elijah was hiding out there, the widow's only son got sick and died, and this is where our first reading begins. It tells us that Elijah brought him back to life. This account is contrasted with the gospel which describes the ease by which Jesus brings a young man back to life with a simple command.

**HOMILY:** People who see our church for the first time often ask me to explain this window here in the front and so I tell them the story of St. Boniface. If you wonder why I'm talking about St. Boniface today – it is because June 5 is his feast day.

The story of St. Boniface begins in England somewhere between 670 and 680 AD. Just to give you some perspective, that is almost exactly 300 years after the time of St. Patrick. Winfrid was his baptismal name and he changed his name to Boniface later on. After the age of seven, he grew up pretty much in a Benedictine monastery in England. At 14 he became a Benedictine monk and in a short time he was a teacher and the headmaster of the school. He could have easily become the abbot of the monastery and would have been able to live a fairly comfortable life until God took him to heaven, but he felt called to be a missionary. His abbot, recognizing the gifts and talents of Boniface, would not allow him to leave the monastery to go off to the missions. Boniface went to see the pope, Gregory II. It was the pope himself who sent him to Germany as a missionary. Of course, by this time in the Church's history, there was Christianity in Germany. For the most part, however, those who claimed to be Christians also practiced paganism - mainly due to the clergy who should have been helping people to be strong in their faith. Instead the clergy were uneducated, lax, and disloyal to their bishop. The pope told Boniface to make things right. One event, early in his missionary career, that would lead to his success was cutting down an oak tree. The tree was considered a sacred object dedicated to the god Thor, also known as Donar. Thor was a hammer-wielding god who was associated with thunder, lightning, storms, oak trees, strength, protection of mankind, healing and fertility. Thor must have been a popular god. One of the days of the week, Thursday, is named after him (Thor's day). It was previously called the "dies Jovis" (day of Jupiter). Another thing that shows the popularity of Thor is the swastika. It is believed to symbolize Thor's hammer and lightning. Archeologists have found swords with the swastika on the handle and/or the belt, indicating, it is supposed, they were seeking the protection of Thor.

Before my digression about Thor, I mentioned there was a certain oak tree considered sacred to Thor. Boniface announced that on a certain day it would be cut it down. The worshippers of Thor gathered on the designated day and said Boniface would be struck dead if he did anything

to the tree. But he cut it down and nothing happened. He used the wood from the tree to build a chapel. This made a great impression on the people and they realized their gods were nonexistent.

In about 20 years, Boniface had the Church in pretty good shape spiritually and so he moved into France to do some missionary work. After about 15 years, he left France and moved on to Friesland. He was most probably in his late 70's about this time. It was in Friesland on June 5, 754, that he and 53 companions were attacked by a band of pagans and martyred.

I'm often asked why we don't have a statue of St. Boniface in church. Well, we have one outside of church at the very top of the front of our church. We have a painting of St. Boniface. It was painted by the same artist who designed the presidential pictures found on US currency.

Boniface was evidently a man of extraordinary intelligence and talent, energy and determination. He put his gifts to work rather than take an easy path that would lead to a comfortable life. His faith and hope were in the Lord Jesus who could, with divine authority, simply say to a dead person "rise up," and they would come back to life. This was the teaching and the hope of St. Boniface, and the basic teaching of our faith, that the Lord Jesus himself, after being crucified, rose to eternal life, a life he came to share with all of us who follow him. Amen.

## **Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time – C Cycle June 12, 2016**

**INTRODUCTION:** (2 Samuel 12, 7-10.13; Galatians 2, 16.19-21; Luke 7, 36 – 8,3) King David was a great king and loved God but, like all of us, he was not perfect. Today's reading occurs shortly after he gave in to his lust for Bathsheba and got her pregnant. Then he arranged for her husband, Uriah, to be killed in battle so he could marry her and cover up his sin. Nathan, God's prophet at the time, was given the mission of confronting the king, and that's where our reading begins. The word "Lord" as used in today's reading refers to God mostly, but "lord" also refers to David's predecessor, King Saul, as when God tells David that God had given him his lord's house and his lord's wives. The theme is on forgiveness which corresponds to the theme in the gospel.

**HOMILY:** Today I want to talk about justice and mercy – since mercy is the theme of today's gospel. Now if mercy is unjust, I think we have to talk about justice first. And when we talk of justice we often speak of laws, and the consequences of breaking those laws. If you visit the Louvre in Paris, you find hundreds, maybe thousands of wonderful and well known artifacts. On one trip to Paris, I spent a whole week there. If I had 10 weeks to be able to spend at the Louvre, I still would not have seen everything I would have wanted to see. There was one piece that really caught my attention, a piece I learned of in the Seminary and I'm not talking about the Mona Lisa. The large, seven foot tall, slab of black rock is the Law Code of Hammurabi. On this rock, written in Akkadian, are 282 laws governing the government and the society of ancient Babylonia. It was discovered in Iran a little over 100 years ago and is one of the earliest attempts in world history to establish justice and order in society.

It is worth commenting how these 282 laws are written. They all have the same format: If you do something that is forbidden, then you will suffer such and such a consequence. An example would be this law: "if anyone is committing a robbery and is caught, he shall be put to death." One of the most famous rules is: "if a man destroy the eye of another man, then they shall

destroy his eye. If one break a man's bone, then they shall break his bone." We usually refer to this law as "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." In saying all this, contrast it with the 10 Commandments. Hammurabi says "if...then..." Hammurabi describes the consequences that comes with wrongdoing. God's laws are directed to each individual in a personal way: "do not kill, do not steal, keep holy the Lord's day, etc." God is speaking like he is in charge (which he is). God's format is much more personal and implies that our disobedience of his commands will jeopardize our relationship with our creator. However, God's mercy; i.e., his forgiveness, can restore that relationship. Before I get into the theme of forgiveness, I want to look a little more closely at the law that says an eye for an eye. That doesn't sound very forgiving.

The law "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth" (also found in the Book of Leviticus 24,20) was an attempt to establish what is fair and just. It meant an injured person could retaliate only to the extent that they had been harmed. It brought some civility to the ancient world. Jesus went beyond justice and urged that we be merciful when he said in the Sermon on the Mount, "if someone strikes you on the one cheek, turn the other cheek" and do not retaliate. At the same time, it sounds like Jesus is telling us to let people walk all over us; however, that's not what he is saying. Even when Jesus was on trial and a guard slapped him, he did not turn the other cheek. He stood up for himself verbally but did not retaliate in a physical way. That's the difference between being assertive and being aggressive.

From a practical point of view, there must be a balance between justice and mercy. As Mahatma Gandhi said: "An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind." There is a mid-point where people have to forgive one another for their mistakes, while at the same time dangerous, people have to be prevented from causing harm and need to be confined, and possible criminals might be deterred by fear for what could happen to them if they did harm. Some situations call for justice and some call for mercy, and it's not always easy to decide which we should choose. That's one way we need the Holy Spirit to help us. We do know that if the government does not forgive, or nature does not forgive, or our neighbor does not forgive, God is always ready to forgive when we turn to him with repentance. God's forgiveness gives us a chance to start over; it helps us to change our lives as our readings today show us. Simon the Pharisee and his friends probably thought they were really good people (and maybe they were), but they could not relate to the overwhelming display of love the sinful woman showed toward Jesus. The gospel doesn't tell us when she realized she had been forgiven. Perhaps it was something Jesus had preached about God's mercy and she believed it. After all, Jesus did say to her "your faith has saved you." Having received God's mercy she was filled with love for the forgiveness she knew she had received.

We have a stained glass window on the Pitt street side of the Church that pictures this event. Do not get this woman mixed up with Mary Magdalene. There is no evidence in the scriptures that there was a connection between the two. There is one other anointing in the gospels right before Jesus was put to death, but that anointing was by Mary of Bethany, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. Mary Magdalene has taken the rap for this gospel for many years, but there is no way of identifying who this woman was.

Two last things I have to say about today's gospel. When Jesus says you are forgiven, that's hard for some people to accept. Believe him – he does not lie. And secondly, when God forgives you, you have to forgive yourself. Amen.

## Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time – C Cycle June 19, 2016

**INTRODUCTION:** (*Zechariah 12,10-11.13,1; Galatians 3,26-29; Luke 9,18-24*) Jesus had only one name: Jesus. “Christ” was not a name; it was a descriptive title meaning the “Anointed One” which signified a king or prophet or high priest. The word “Christ” comes from the Greek word *Christos*. In Hebrew, the word would be *Messiah*. As God’s Anointed One, the Christ would free God’s people from the control of the Romans who ruled over them, occupied their land, and taxed them severely. In today’s gospel Jesus asked: “Who do you say that I am?” Peter acknowledges Jesus was the Christ of God, the anointed one, the Jewish ruler and king who would free God’s people from Roman domination. Jesus, however, gave them a fuller picture of what his role would be, and it would involve suffering - something no Jew would expect or could even comprehend. The Christ or the Messiah was expected to be a glorious and powerful liberator and he would punish the Romans for their treatment of the Jews.

Today’s first reading from Zechariah (a prophet who lived 500 years before Christ) foretold a time when God would purify his people. This process of purification led to the Jews killing one of God’s servants; having done that the people repented. Jerusalem’s mourning and repentance would lead to their purification. The person Zechariah was speaking of has never been identified. It was only after the resurrection that Jesus’ followers were able to discover new ways to understand certain Old Testament scripture passages. They found new meaning in many passages about suffering and they could see how those passages applied to and were fulfilled in Jesus. St. John’s gospel specifically applies today’s first reading to Jesus’ being pierced by a lance as he hung on the cross. “They shall look on him whom they have pierced.” (*Jn 19,37*).

**HOMILY:** Statistics show that children who grow up without a father in the home are five times more likely to end up in poverty and to commit crime, nine times more likely to drop out of school, and 20 times more likely to end up in prison, especially if they **never** had a father in the home. These statistics stay the same no matter how rich or poor a family might be. Fathers matter. Thank you a thousand times, you who are fathers or who have the role of being a father in a home. Happy Father’s Day.

Since my introduction was so long, I’m going to have a short homily. I hope no one will mind. In our gospel today, Jesus isn’t just questioning the apostles when he asks: “who do you say that I am?” He inquires of each one of us here: “who do you say that I am?” Now don’t get out your catechisms or religious text books and give him a theological answer. He knows what the catechism and the religious text book say. He wants to know who he is to you. Is it his words that inspire us? Is it his law that guides our behavior? Is it his teaching that determines our values and priorities and commitments? These questions are hard to answer sometimes. That’s because we’re like Peter – not perfect. Peter was partly right: Jesus was the Christ, the anointed Son of David who has come to save the world. But Peter expected a powerful and gifted king or high priest or wise judge – not a Messiah who would have to suffer. For himself, Peter expected to have a high and important place in God’s kingdom; he didn’t expect that he might have to suffer because he became one of Jesus’ followers.

In our everyday lives we all experience two basic drives. One is to possess, acquire, take, own and to have. The other is the desire to give and to serve. To a certain extent we need to possess and acquire things in order to provide for ourselves and our loved ones, but in the long run, what gives us the greatest happiness is being able to help others. “The true fulfillment of

life is to be found in the service of Christ and ...our only security is in him.” (*the New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol IX, pg 205*)

How we answer the great question “who do you say that I am?” determines not only how we live in the present, it determines who we shall be in the future with God. Amen.

## **Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time – C Cycle** **June 26, 2016**

**INTRODUCTION** – No one knows for sure how often Jesus traveled to Jerusalem. Luke tells us when Jesus was young, his parents brought him to Jerusalem every year. It was about a three-day trip on foot, one way, if you made 25 miles a day. And that would have been a challenge considering that some portions of the trip were very hilly. Of course, we know nothing about Jesus’ years as a teenager or young adult. We only know about things he said or did after he began his public ministry. St. John, in his gospel, mentions three times during Jesus’ public ministry when he was in Jerusalem for Passover. Matthew, Mark and Luke tell us only of one trip to Jerusalem – Jesus’ last trip. In today’s gospel Luke begins to tell us about that last trip. It is an extremely important turning point in his gospel. Jesus knew what was waiting for him when he got there. This part of the gospel is called the “Journey Narrative,” and it goes on for practically ten chapters.

Our first reading was chosen to correspond with the ideal of total commitment to one’s call. It tells about two Old Testament prophets, Elijah and Elisha, who lived about 850 years before Christ. Elijah was getting old and his life was coming to an end. At God’s command he chose Elisha to replace him. Elisha was busy farming and Elijah came up to him and placed his mantle on Elisha’s shoulders. This gesture symbolized God’s call – that Elisha should replace Elijah. It would be analogous to my taking off my vestment and putting it over someone’s shoulders. The gesture would be obvious. The reading tells us Elisha had 12 yoke of oxen which would indicate that Elisha must have been quite a prosperous farmer. When he sacrificed his animals and burned his farming equipment, he was indicating his total commitment to his new vocation. Just as Jesus would do almost nine centuries later as he began his journey to Jerusalem, he broke completely with his former way of life and did not look back,

**HOMILY** – Most of you have heard this story, but it is worth repeating because it can speak to so many of us – I say “us” because I have to admit I’m as guilty in one way or another as anyone here. It’s a story about Satan calling his chief staff members together to complain that business is bad, too many people are getting into heaven, and the evil beings in hell had to come up with a strategy to change that around. So, Satan asks, who has a good idea of what we can do. One advisor said: “let’s tell people there is no heaven and they need to get as much enjoyment out of life as possible right now.” Satan was unimpressed – he said we’ve been using that line for thousands of years.” His next advisor said: “let’s tell people there is no hell, that magically everyone will be forgiven and everyone will be happy – no matter how much evil they may have in their hearts or how many people they’ve hurt.” Again Satan was unimpressed. “That won’t work. Too many people are reading the Bible and believing it.” Finally, a third member of Satan’s staff said: “Tell people there is no hurry...no hurry to change their life, to forgive someone who hurt them, to ask forgiveness for something they should not have done; there’s no hurry to get to Church this weekend - they can always go next weekend; no hurry to set aside some time to pray, to help a friend or neighbor - tomorrow will be soon enough.” Satan was impressed, but he said “what do you tell them if they are afraid they will run out of

tomorrows?” Satan’s staff member had an answer for that too; he said: “I just tell them not to think about that. It’s just morose and depressing to think about – think about happier things.”

As I wrote this, I was reminded of when I was teaching high school. I had to teach a section on the four last things. The students kept complaining, “why do we need to think about those things, it’s so gloomy.” By the way: the four last things were death, judgement, heaven and hell. They wanted to talk about peace, joy, happiness and love. Believe me: I’m all for peace, joy, happiness and love, but thinking about the negative events that might come our way – as they reach everyone eventually – help us to be better prepared to deal with them.

Getting to today’s gospel, what is Jesus telling us today? He’s telling us there will come a time when we run out of tomorrows. In our gospel we see a determined Jesus. Following the will of his father is urgent. He didn’t have time to call down destruction on the Samaritans who rejected him, so they lost out on whatever he could have brought them. The persons who wanted to follow Jesus wanted Jesus to provide them with a few more comforts, or to have Jesus allow them to spend a little longer with their families. Jesus didn’t have time to do that.

When a person is young, it seems like tomorrows are infinite. As we age, we realize that’s not so. Jesus knew his days were numbered. He predicted it three times. It was the suffering and the cross he foresaw, but he also saw he would enter into eternal glory with his Heavenly Father.

He doesn’t tell us, if we follow him, we will avoid suffering – that’s part of life in this world for everyone, but if we follow him we can handle suffering more easily and our pain and suffering will lead us also to eternal glory.