

INTRODUCTION: (*Philemon: 9-10, 12-17*) We will not understand today's second reading without some background. The event is only about two people: the Apostle Paul in prison for his faith in Christ and Onesimus, a runaway slave. A third person is mentioned, Philemon, the slave owner. Paul is writing to Philemon informing him that Onesimus is with Paul. He is writing in an attempt to reconcile Onesimus with Philemon. By law, Philemon could have his runaway slave killed for escaping. Slavery in those days was not like the slavery in our Country two or three hundred years ago. Slaves came from nations and peoples that Rome had conquered. Most slaves were probably white; many would have been educated and would have been skilled as musicians, scribes, craftsmen, teachers and even doctors. In Paul's day, prison was just a temporary arrangement until a Roman magistrate decided the prisoner would be executed, sent into exile, have their property confiscated, or be set free. Prisoners needed friends or family to provide for their basic needs and, apparently, Onesimus did that for Paul. Paul is on good terms with Philemon as he was one of his first converts to Christ. While in prison, Paul also converted Onesimus (that's why he calls him "my son"). See how subtly Paul asks Philemon to receive Onesimus as a brother. Even though faith in Christ had not hit slavery head on, today's reading shows in a small way what power it has to change lives, to change society, and to change the world.

HOMILY: (*Luke 14, 25-33*)

Today Mother Teresa is being canonized a saint. Canonization is an infallible declaration that a certain individual is a model of sanctity; an individual who has given us a concrete example of how to be a Christian. It is a declaration that this person is enjoying God's glory in heaven and is worthy of our honor and veneration. Notice I said veneration and did not say adoration, which is directed only to God. Since the holiness of the saint was the gift of God's grace, to venerate a saint is always to praise and glorify God. (*Theological Dictionary*, Karl Rahner and Herbert Vorgrimler, pg 481) Mother Teresa is not being made a saint today, she already is a saint. The Church is officially declaring her worthy of our honor. The Church also declares that she is a person whom we can pray to as someone close to God who can intercede for us in our times of need.

Mother Teresa started hearing God's call to a religious life at 12 years of age and at 18 she joined the Loreto Sisters in Dublin, Ireland. Within a few months of joining the Sisters, she found herself on a boat going to India where she would spend the remaining 70 years of her life doing what the movie and the biography of her life referred to as a beautiful thing for God. Mother Teresa started off as a teacher. The Loreto Sisters tried to tackle the problem of poverty through education, but there was an abundance of suffering in Calcutta beyond the reach of the classroom. "It is not possible to find worse poverty" she wrote. She often exhausted herself and had many bouts with poor health. In her mid-thirties, she experienced what she described as a "call within a call." She had the very rare experience of hearing God's voice calling her to leave the Sisters of Loreto and begin working with the poor. It was a difficult challenge to leave the convent where she had been very happy. She would be exposing herself to much suffering and ridicule, but God's voice was so clear as he asked: "would you refuse to do this for me?" Her request to leave her religious order had to go all the way to Pope Pius XII before it was granted, but it was. Now, experiencing great peace and joy from God, she was on her own. She prepared herself for her work by getting some medical training and living with the Little Sisters of the Poor. She eventually moved to a small house in town and, amazingly, she began to attract people interested in helping her. She also experienced some of her neighbors trying to chase her out of the neighborhood. The leader of one group of young Hindus was determined to chase her out of the area, but when he saw the care and love she gave to the poor and the dying, he went back to his gang and said he would get rid of

her only on one condition: that they persuade their mothers and sisters to undertake the same service.

The next 50 years of her life was made up of nonstop activity and compassionate service to the poor - an endless procession of opening up new hospices, traveling around the world to meet with the members of an ever-expanding order, and helping found an order of brothers, and of priests, and then lay coworkers. Malcolm Muggeridge produced a film about her in 1969. He was not a believer, but inspired by Mother Teresa, he eventually entered the Church. Ten years later she was given the Nobel Peace Prize. I mentioned earlier that she was filled with peace and joy – but there was a period of several years when she suffered a kind of spiritual darkness. Many saints go through lengthy periods of spiritual dryness. It is during those times that a person's faith grows deeper. Considering the kind of work Mother Teresa was doing, it's no wonder she was not experiencing a lot of peace and joy. Many years ago, I remember my supervisor at Longview Hospital telling me: "I listen to depressed people all day and when I go home in the evening, I am depressed." Mother Teresa went through a lot more depressing experiences than almost anyone could imagine, yet she continued her service to the poorest of the poor. One special help she had was she and her followers spent long hours in prayer every day. I have a recollection that it was somewhere between one and three hours a day. Today there are more than 5,000 Missionaries of Charity sisters in 758 communities (plus 450 or so men) living, working, and praying in 139 countries.

I would like to conclude with three of my favorite quotes from Mother Teresa. The first two came from a meeting she had with a Jewish journalist who was a bit uncomfortable being Jewish as he was having lunch with this holy Catholic Celebrity:

- 1) They were in Philadelphia when she said: there are thousands of people in Philadelphia who are forgotten, unwanted. Hungry for love. We pass them by. Love them. Loneliness is the greatest poverty."
- 2) When the topic of his Jewishness came up she said: "that's wonderful. The founder of our faith was also a Jew."
- 3) And my favorite: "God does not demand that I be successful. God demands that I be faithful." Amen.

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time– C Cycle

September 10, 2016

INTRODUCTION: God's forgiveness is today's theme. Our first reading (Exodus 32,7-11.13-14) takes us back to Moses, about 1300 years before Christ. The people of Israel had just escaped from Egypt and were going through the desert of Sinai on their way to the Promised Land. They had already made a covenant with God at Mt. Sinai, and they had promised they would worship only the God of Israel as their God. When God called Moses back to the top of Mt. Sinai to speak with him again, the people got into trouble. They fashioned for themselves a golden calf and worshipped it as their god. This is where our first reading begins. God is angry with his people. Notice, in speaking to Moses, he calls them "your people." Moses intercedes for the people and "convinces" God to be forgiving. His prayer displays total unselfishness. God, of course, forgives them. In the second reading, we hear St. Paul describe what a sinful person he once was and how God was merciful to him (1 Tim, 1,12-17). In today's gospel, which is the entire fifteenth chapter of St. Luke, we hear three beautiful parables on God's forgiveness (Lk. 15,1-32).

HOMILY: We just heard several beautiful stories about God and about God's mercy: the first reading tells us how God forgave his people for worshipping a Canaanite god right after they promised to worship only the God of Israel. We heard how God forgave Paul after he had been

persecuting Christians. We heard three parables from Jesus, each one illustrating God's mercy. The readings were long and the message was clear, so I don't think I need to speak very long today. There are just a couple of details I would like to point out. First notice the joy Jesus talks about in each parable. In the story of the prodigal son, the word joy is not used, but we can see the joy expressed by the father when he sees his wayward son. The father runs to him. In that culture older men did not run, it was undignified, but the father ran and welcomed his son, even without giving the son a chance to make his apology. God's happiness is so great when we have been away from him and then we return.

Another detail I want to stress. In the first two parables about the lost sheep and the lost coin, the persons who lost them, the shepherd and the lady, actively searched for what they lost until they found what they were seeking. With the prodigal son, the father did not actively chase after his son to drag him home. He waited and watched and hoped his son might return. As in the parable of the sheep and the coin, God actively seeks to lead us back to himself if we have strayed, but as in the prodigal son, God waits for us to make the decision to return. God respects our free will, and if we choose to separate ourselves from him, it's up to us to choose to return or as the parable puts it, "to come to our senses."

The last thing I want to mention is the older brother. Jesus leaves us in suspense as to whether he forgave his younger brother. We can't be too hard on the older brother for feeling the way he did. Remember, the younger brother asked for his half of the inheritance so everything that was left would eventually belong to the older brother. Here is the forgiving father spending a significant portion of the older brother's assets in order to welcome back his prodigal son. When Jesus tells us "be merciful, just as also your Father is merciful," (Lk. 6,36) it is sometimes a big order. Amen.

25th Sunday in Ordinary Time— C Cycle

September 17, 2016

INTRODUCTION (*Amos 8, 4-7; I Timothy 2, 1-8; Luke 16, 1-13*) Seven hundred fifty years Before Christ, Israel was enjoying a time of great financial and material prosperity, but spiritually they were bankrupt. The prophet Amos, who lived at that time, told them so. In their prosperity, the Israelites lost their focus on God. The Sabbath and the new moon were supposed to be days of prayer and rest. The Israelites, however, resented them as an interruption in what they considered most important in life - making money. The ephah and shekel, mentioned in our first reading, were weights used in buying and selling. They didn't use honest weights; thereby, cheating both their suppliers and customers. They even exploited their customers by mixing useless materials in with the products they wanted to sell; such as, mixing chaff with the wheat. They put little value on the life of a child. In some ways, the world hasn't changed much in the past two thousand, seven hundred and fifty years since the days of Amos.

HOMILY Amos was a farmer and he spoke directly and to the point. Jesus spoke in parables. His approach made people spend a little time thinking about what he had to say. Jesus really challenged people with today's parable. Although his point is very simple, he leaves us with many questions. The key to understanding it is when Jesus says: "the children of this world are more prudent in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light." (vs. 8b) The most important word in this sentence is prudent. Jesus is not praising the dishonest steward because he was dishonest. He praises him because he was prudent; he knew what he needed to do to survive and he did it.

Prudence you may know is the first of the four cardinal virtues: prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance. Prudence means having the knowledge of what a person needs to do and the

concrete means to accomplish it. For example, I might know that prayer is good for me or exercise is good for me, but if I never get around to praying or exercising, I'm not being prudent.

Let's take a moment to look a little more closely at today's parable so we can maybe understand it better. The rich man was most probably an absentee landlord who in that culture was not a much-loved person (somewhat like Ebenezer Scrooge in Dicken's Christmas Carol). He was so rich that he had to hire someone to manage his finances - a steward. The steward was accused of being dishonest with his master's money and the master believed the charge was true. The manager, the steward, realized he was going to be out of a job. The steward's dishonesty became even more evident when he began to reduce the debts that various clients owed to his master. In doing this he was creating a lot of good will for himself - setting up a string of favors that he knew would not be forgotten.

Notice the steward is obviously stealing from the rich man and giving away the rich man's assets when he asks each debtor: "how much do you owe my master?" The rich man must have been really rich, and he could show that he was because he overlooked the steward's dishonesty and remarked on the prudence of the steward. In a sense, his overlooking the dishonesty reflects the kingdom of God where God is willing to forgive our sins, and where God asks us to forgive and love each other – even our enemies. God's standard of justice is first of all to be generous.

This parable can apply to various other lessons in life; such as, being prudent in our spiritual lives makes us rich in God's eyes; not just building up our material wealth in today's world, but using money to help others so we have friends in heaven when it is our time to go; by being trustworthy in small matters, you will be trusted with much more important blessings; being respectful of other people's property can make us respectable; and knowing that pleasing God is our most important job in this world. Amen.

26th Sunday in Ordinary Time– C Cycle

September 24, 2016

INTRODUCTION: Today in our first reading we listen to the prophet Amos. (*Amos 6, 1a.4-7*) He is speaking to those living in the area of Jerusalem about 700 BC. He calls them "the complacent in Zion." (Zion is another name for Jerusalem.) The Assyrians, who lived in what is now northern Iraq, had already destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel and those in the south did not seem to care. The northern kingdom is called Joseph in today's reading because it was originally settled by descendants of the patriarch Joseph. The complacent in Jerusalem were living pampered, comfortable lives, and not concerned that their own country was headed toward the same fate because of their social and moral depravity.

HOMILY:

Our gospel begins by telling us of two men: one very rich and one destitute and suffering. Let's imagine for a moment that we are Jews living in the vicinity of Jerusalem around the year 700 BC. Our faith had taught us how to live and how to please God, and most of what we were learning came to us through tradition. Some of it, especially the story of the Exodus and the early kings, may have been written down by this time. We were taught that if we pleased God, God would bless us; if we angered God, bad things would happen to us. If we were Jews living in 700 BC, we would have expected that reward and punishment came to us only in this world. In 700 BC, the Jews believed that when we die, our spirit went to a place called Sheol. There we would know neither joy nor sorrow. Sheol is a place of dust and clay and darkness. 700 years later, by the time of Jesus, many Jews still thought this way. Even when God commanded that we love God

and neighbor, keeping that command would have no influence over what happened to us when we die. Loving God and neighbor, as far as we knew, only made this life more bearable.

So, if we thought this way, and we heard Jesus talking about some rich fellow, we would likely think that he lived a life that pleased God; whereas, the poor and suffering fellow must have displeased God at one time, so God is punishing him. After all, doesn't the first psalm tell us that the one who delights in God's law "in all that he does, prospers, but not so with the wicked, not so." Thus, if we lived in 700 BC, we would have found Jesus' parable to be the exact opposite of what we believed to be true.

You can stop imagining that you are a Jew living in 700 BC and remember that you are a follower of Christ. You can remember also that love of God and love of neighbor are the most important commandments, commandments that, if we keep them, will bring us joy and blessings not only in this life, but in eternal life.

Jesus did not tell us whether the rich man or Lazarus were good or bad people. Does this mean that prayer and other virtues such as patience, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control, purity, honesty, etc., are unimportant. No, but love of God and of others is basic and these other virtues are ways of expressing that love.

We could speculate whether this parable has any connection with John's gospel where Jesus raised his friend Lazarus back to life. In Dickens' *Christmas Carol*, Ebenezer Scrooge was changed when dead spirits appeared to him – but that was a novel. When Jesus brought Lazarus back to life, Jewish leaders plotted to kill Jesus, but they also plotted to kill Lazarus. Many people were beginning to believe in Jesus because of what he did in raising Lazarus. Jesus is saying we have everything we need to know how to live a good life. There are none so blind as those who **will** not see.