

27th Sunday in Ordinary Time

October 5, 2008

INTRODUCTION

(Isaiah 5,1-7; Matthew 21,33-43) Most of us know how much work is involved in caring for a garden. Just imagine how much work is involved with setting up an entire vineyard, which is a full time business. Isaiah describes some of what was involved in today's first reading. If we wonder why there needed to be a watchtower in the vineyard, it was needed, both day and night, to protect the grapes from thieves and predators, especially during harvest time. Apparently Isaiah was a musician as well as a talented poet. As he sang his song we can imagine the shock his audience felt when they discovered they were the vineyard he was singing about. From history we know Isaiah's prophecy literally came to be true when the Assyrian invasion came and much of the land was laid waste.

HOMILY

As I reflected on today's readings about vineyards, I thought back about 40 years to a day when I was traveling with my sister, brother, and sister-in-law in Germany. My brother and I had a great love for Mosel wine at that time and we spent the whole day driving down along the Mosel river, just looking at vineyards. At the end of the day we stopped in a little place to get something to eat. We were tired and thirsty and ordered some of the local wine. It was cold and delicious and, since we hadn't had much to eat or drink that day, it hit us hard. We both started laughing at the silliest things. My sister (a nun) was much irritated at the two of us, which made us laugh all the more. I guess I wasn't very sensitive to my sister at the time, but my brother and I sure had a fun time.

At the time I just enjoyed the benefits of all those vineyards and hardly thought of all the work involved in making it possible for us to enjoy ourselves. Maintaining a vineyard is a year round operation, caring for the vines, pruning them for the best yield, protecting them from anything or anyone who might destroy them, pressing the grapes, storing the juice until it ferments, etc., etc. Vineyards were abundant in Judea at the time of Jesus, so it's natural Jesus would base his story on something his listeners were very familiar with. Jews used lots of wine, in liturgies and at meals, yet they always respected it. Jews have one of the lowest rates of alcoholism among all nationalities. Today we have two stories about vineyards.

In the first story from Isaiah, over 700 years before Christ, the vineyard represented the people of Israel who were a great disappointment to God. God made them his own special people and blessed them abundantly; yet they turned their back on him and the commandments he had given them. Their lives represented sour grapes after all God had done for them.

In the second story from the gospel, the vineyard represents God's people, but it is the religious leaders of Jesus' time who are taken to task. They ignored their responsibilities to God and controlled and led God's people, not in God's ways, but to protect their own interests. We can see the first set of servants who were sent to the tenant farmers as representing the earlier

prophets like Amos, Hosea, Isaiah and the second group of servants representing the later prophets like Jeremiah and Ezekiel and others. The son who was put to death was Jesus, of course. I wonder if the parable would apply to the leaders of our modern culture who tell us God is like some big jolly Santa Claus who's going to give to every person everything they want to be happy when they die. This is the popular theology - everyone is going to heaven no matter how they lived. Whether they prayed and went to church or not, whether they hurt or cheated others; none of that matters. But that's not what Jesus taught us. The ten commandments are still in force.

Today is Pro-Life Sunday. One of the worst sins of our culture is abortion, the killing of an innocent, defenseless human life. People rationalize all over the place about this issue, but it is a fact that innocent human life is deliberately being destroyed, mostly so as not to embarrass or inconvenience the person who is carrying that life. People who were not planning to conceive often are looking for help to know what to do. Pro-life programs offer that help. Special envelopes are in the pews today to offer support to pro-life programs and organizations. There is an article in today's bulletin that challenges us to realize that abortion is not the only way our culture does not support life and how we can become in all ways more the kind of person God calls us to be in today's second reading: true, honorable, pure, just and gracious in whatever we do. Amen.

28th Sunday Ordinary Time

Oct. 12, 2008

INTRODUCTION: (Isaiah 25, 6-10a; Matthew 22, 1-14) Today's first reading and today's gospel give us a beautiful picture of what it is we're praying for when we say "thy will be done." God's will is for our complete and eternal happiness. Our gospel warns us, however, that in order to be part of his beautiful plan, we need to respond to the invitation he offers us.

Our second reading is part of a thank you note St. Paul wrote to the Philippians for the money they sent him to help him most probably while he was in prison. The Philippian community was the only community that were thoughtful enough to offer him any support in his ministry. Responding to the invitation God gave him to serve as an apostle was a difficult job for Paul.

HOMILY: Heaven is going to surpass all our hopes and expectations. It's going to be more wonderful than we can imagine. Because there will be love and joy and peace like we've never experienced, it's hard for God to tell us about it. All he can do is to use images that we are familiar with: a great banquet, a wedding feast, the elimination of suffering and death, wealth that cannot be exhausted as in the hidden treasure, the pearl of great price or the mansion God is preparing for us. Today we heard Isaiah compare it to a great banquet and Jesus compare it to a wedding celebration for a prince which would be an event people would remember for years.

As Jesus tells us, to have all this wonder and joy we must respond to an invitation. We must be wise enough not to turn it down. How will we recognize the invitation when it comes? As I reflected on this week's gospel, I came up with a long list of ways we might recognize it. I won't bore you with everything on my list but just give you a few ideas of how we might recognize it. It sounds something like this: "Come to me all you who labor and are burdened and I will refresh you." Or "I am the good shepherd," a shepherd whose sheep hear his voice and follow him. We hear the invitation in the sermon on the mount when Jesus tells us: "Everyone who listens to these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock." Or from the Book of Revelation: "Behold I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, then I will enter his house and dine with him and he with me." He doesn't promise everything will be wonderful in this world if we respond to his call, for: "If anyone would come after me, let him take up his cross and follow me." But for those who do respond, he promises "I will be with you always." "I will not leave you orphans." In a special way he invites us to begin enjoying the wonderful banquet heaven will provide when he tells us, "Unless you eat the flesh of the son of man and drink his blood you do not have life in you." He invites us each morning to "take this and eat, take this and drink." For Catholics this is part of his invitation to "Keep holy the Lord's day."

You might say that's a commandment, not an invitation. Yes, he does command us because we don't always feel like doing what we should, but today he invites us for he wants us to come to him not just because we're commanded, but he wants us to come because we want to, he wants us to come out of love.

There is one part of the parable that puzzle many people and that is the last part about the wedding garment. Some scholars have suggested that wedding garments were provided to guests as they arrived because the king, apparently a kind and generous man, would not have responded with such anger if they were not extremely important and easily obtainable. Jesus uses this part of the parable to warn his followers that even though a person says they believe in him, it's not going to help them much if they do not put their faith into action.

Our new age theology wants us to think that everyone is going to be blessed in the next life. Jesus is telling us eternal happiness is not to be taken for granted. The way to eternal happiness is open for all, but we have a free will as to how we will respond. May the banquet we come to today, eating his body and drinking his blood, lead us to the eternal banquet he has prepared for us. Amen.

30th Sunday in Ordinary Time

October 26, 2008

We have a short gospel today, but the ideas it contains are enormous. Numerous volumes have been written about each of these themes, love for God and love for others. Often when I prepare a couple for marriage, I ask them what they think love is. Answers range from a very well thought out response involving the notion of self-giving to a smirky, embarrassed answer like “well, you know.” TV and movies seem to portray only one kind of love, the kind of love that could be described as a wonderfully pleasant, euphoric kind of feeling that seems to promise fulfillment and happiness forever but its underlying function is to facilitate mating. Its promise of fulfillment and happiness forever is generally misleading and temporary. This kind of love has a lot to recommend it: 1) if it didn't exist probably very few of us would have been conceived, 2) it is a taste of the joys of heaven, and 3) it sells movies, books, magazines and TV programs and that's why we hear a lot about it. I have seen many marriages fail because one or the other person believes this is the only kind of love there is or the only kind of love that really matters. When the romantic “high” dims, they move on. But those who realize there is a lot more to love than romance work through challenging times in relationships. They discover a depth of love that may be lacking in fireworks but is more secure and more deeply joyful. Fortunately our faith keeps reminding us there are many facets and stages of love and not just one kind.

Our English language, with its vast vocabulary, uses only one word, love, for a multitude of emotions, attitudes, expressions and activities. Even the Greeks 2000 years ago had three different words for love: eros - passionate love (hence the word erotic), philia - friendship love (hence the name Philadelphia: the city of brotherly love) and agape - love that is compassionate, generous, faithful, unselfish and able to reach out even to our enemies.

Several years ago I used some ideas from Dr. M. Scott Peck, a psychiatrist and ordained Episcopal priest. I would like to repeat some of his thoughts because they are so illustrative. He tells us we often confuse love with affection and there are significant differences between the two. He tells us “affection is mostly an emotion between equals... On the other hand, we can love virtually anyone if we set our minds to it. Liking or affection is primarily a feeling; love is primarily a matter of decision and action.” This may sound abstract, but it has practical applications. For example, when working with some of his patients, he helped them to understand they were not obliged to like all of their relatives and this paradoxically made it easier for them to love them.

I think Dr. Peck gave a lovely example from his own marriage of how love grows and matures. I found this very insightful. He and his wife, Lily, were married for 40 years. He said as the bloom of their romantic love faded, there was at first denial. They worked hard to act like it couldn't be happening. When that didn't work and they were faced with their profound differences (which, of course, they perceived as faults in each other) they became angry at each other and even angrier as they attempted, without success, to somehow change the other. When that failed, they eventually descended into a lengthy phase of depression wherein each wondered whether

it was worth it all. He then says gradually, mysteriously and almost miraculously, they emerged into a stage where increasingly they began to accept their deep differences of personality as mere differences, often more reflective of virtue than fault. Their marriage had come to a point where he described Lily as his best friend with whom he could have lots of fun and enjoy many common interests. I thought their story was a good example how love can develop and grow.

I see this same pattern take place in people's relationship with God. There are moments in our spiritual lives when we discover God's love and presence and it is powerful and wonderful. Those "high" moments may come early in our relationship or they may come after years of praying and serving God. When they come it brings a "high" we never want to let go of. In the normal course of any relationship, even our relationship with God, there are periods when we feel as if we are in a desert. There are times when we get angry with God, when we try to make deals, when we feel let down because he doesn't give us what we want. If we weather all these stages and do not give up faith, all these stages will lead to a deep love and a profound joy.

I could talk on love for a long time, because as I said earlier, much has been written about it. But I wish to briefly conclude with these thoughts. Mature love for God and for others has to be measured more by what we are giving than by what we are getting. Warm, fuzzy feelings sure are nice, but they are not a criterion of love for God or others. Loving God means obeying God and giving him prayer and worship. Loving our neighbor means helping them in whatever way we can. That's why in the Scriptures love is referred to as a commandment, because we don't always feel like praying or keeping the commandments; we do not always feel like helping our neighbor. Kathryn Hepburn said it so well: " You give because you love and cannot help giving. If you are very lucky, you may be loved back. That is delicious, but it does not necessarily happen." With God, however, God doesn't love us because we love him. He loved us first. The crucifix and the Eucharist demonstrate that. He just asks our love in return, which we offer each time we come to Mass. Amen.