

12th Sunday in Ordinary Time

June 21, 2009

INTRODUCTION: {Job, 38, 1-8; II Cor. 3, 14-17; Mk. 4, 35-41} We learn from the day we get punished for something we didn't do that: "Life is not fair." This feeling is one of the most common reasons people give up their faith in God. The book of Job was an attempt to understand this dilemma: "How can God be just and fair and still allow bad things to happen to good people." As pointed out several times in the story of Job, he was a righteous man. In spite of his goodness, he suffered all kinds of tragedy, and he wanted to know why. The question of innocent suffering is dealt with in 42 chapters. Our first reading today gives us a tiny, tiny portion of God's answer to Job. Basically God told Job, "You don't know anything about how the universe operates; just let me take care of things and trust me." The encounter with God that Job experienced was enough of an answer that somehow satisfied Job. Perhaps the fact that God answered him, even though Job didn't understand, was all the satisfaction he needed.

HOMILY: All world religions are built on the basic premise that if we do good we will be rewarded and if we do evil we will be punished. It's the basic belief of the Hindu's and Buddhists (the law of Karma – where our next life is determined, for better or for worse by the good or bad things we did in this life), it was the belief of the ancient pagans although pagan gods seemed to be more interested in being given due worship and sacrifice than in moral behavior, it was the belief of the Egyptians, it was the belief of the Jews. Let us listen, for example, to Moses' last words to his people before they entered the promised land. "If you obey the commandments of the Lord, your God ...you will live and grow numerous and the Lord your God will bless you in the land you are entering to occupy. If, however, you turn away your hearts and will not listen,...I tell you now that you will certainly perish."

I certainly support this theology – a good life will be a blessing for us and an evil life will bring us many problems – in this life and the next. Now the Jews did not have any understanding of the next life as we believe in it. Up until a couple of hundred years B.C. they expected that any reward or punishment a person had coming to them happened in this life. But everyday experience often seems to work the opposite. Good people seem to suffer unfairly, while bad people seem to get by with murder (literally or figuratively).

The book of Job struggled with this problem perhaps some 500 years before Christ. We still struggle with the problem of innocent people suffering. Some pagan religions concluded that their gods were not powerful enough or did not care enough to stop evil in the world; or perhaps they were not petitioning the right gods; similar to this some modern writers concluded that God was dead. Other religions, especially early Christian heretics called Gnostics, held that there are two supreme deities, one good and one evil, and they are constantly in conflict with one another in their efforts to influence the world for good or for evil. Three explanations that we can relate to, although other religions hold these too, are: 1) There is no such thing as a truly "innocent" person. We're all guilty of sin and evil desires even if we do not act on them. The idea of Original Sin helps explain the presence of evil in all of us. We can find this idea in St. Paul's

epistle to the Romans. Thus there is no such thing as “innocent” human suffering. There is only God’s mercy for the sinner. 2) A second answer to suffering is that suffering is a crucial step in preparing for salvation. Salvation results from lessons we can only learn through suffering, such as humility, or that we are not spiritually self-sufficient, or we must seek God’s mercy. 3) Lastly suffering is only temporary, even if it lasts a lifetime in this world. In reality, this life is only a moment compared to eternity.

Whatever explanation or combination of explanations we may choose to accept, for me the final solution to the problem of good people suffering depends on the attitude that we have towards it and the important attitude is trust. St. Paul said “for those who love God, all things work for the best.” That’s what keeps me optimistic. Trust. It’s not much different than the relationship we had with our parents when we were young. We had to take a lot of things on faith until we were old enough to understand. And as we congratulated our mothers a few weeks ago, today we congratulate our fathers, the first people we learned to trust and we thank them for the ways they imparted life to us.

As I conclude I would like us to think of today’s gospel for a moment. Whether we were ever caught in a storm on the sea or not, like the Apostles in today’s gospel, we’ve all gone through emotional life experiences that were just as frightening. And we’ve all had times when we thought Jesus was asleep, when we’ve prayed and prayed and received no answer; times when we wanted to ask him “do you not care that we are perishing?” What was Jesus’ answer? After he calmed the sea he asked: “Why are you terrified? Do you not yet have faith?” Doesn’t that say it all? Amen.