

31st Sunday in Ordinary Time – B Cycle

November 4, 2012

(Deut. 6, 2-6; Hebrews 7,23-28; Mark 12,28b-34) Last week our gospel was about Jesus healing a blind man in Jericho. His plan was to move on from there to Jerusalem which he did. Our readings skip over Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, his cleansing the Temple of merchants and money-changers, various challenges from Jewish leaders. That brings us to today's gospel where we meet a scribe (the equivalent of a lawyer in Jewish society) who, if he was hostile to Jesus, changed his attitude in the course of their dialogue. He asks Jesus what is the first of all the commandments. He's not checking whether Jesus knew his ten commandments. By asking for the first of all the commandments, he is asking which of the 613 commandments in Jewish law takes priority over all the rest. Jesus quoted what is known as the "Shema Israel." Those are two Hebrew words which mean "Hear O Israel," words which introduce the commandment Jesus quotes from Deuteronomy. Let us look carefully at Jesus' answer: "the Lord our God is one Lord, whom we should love with our whole being (that's what heart and soul and mind and strength mean) and we should love our neighbor as ourselves. The ten commandments we know are included in these two commandments, which include a lot more besides. Love of neighbor is, in one sense, is not actually a "second" commandment but is essentially connected with love of God. For example, St. John tells us "whoever does not love a brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. This is the commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother." (I John, 4, 20-21)

So my homily today is on love. One evening several couples were having dinner together and the conversation drifted onto the subject of how the husbands met their wives and vice versa. Some had very romantic stories. Finally, the last man in the group to speak said "Well Betty and I met in college. We were matched up by a computer according to compatibility." Then he was quiet. "That's all you can say about our courtship?" his wife asked. "Well, no," he replied with a grin, "They've fixed the computer since then." (Reader's Digest: Laughter, the Best Medicine: pg 162) Life has its glorious times and its challenging times, whether we're married or not. One of the things that makes life both wonderful and difficult is love.

A talk on love could go in numerous directions and still leave many things not mentioned. I'm not going to try to say everything there is to say, just a few things. First of all, love is not always a feeling (sometimes it is which is wonderful) but there are enough times when we don't feel like being loving but we have to do it anyway. Love is more a "doing" thing than a "feeling" thing. That's why the Bible calls it a commandment.

With regard to the first great commandment, love for God, I believe many people think they are loving God if they have some sort of positive affect toward God and think of him as a nice guy. As long as life is going well for them, they have forgotten that love for God includes giving God praise, honor, worship and thanksgiving. This includes more than a casual "thanks Jesus for helping me find a parking place." One of the commandments is to keep holy the Lord's day. That doesn't mean we have to sit around all day praying on Sunday; it does include setting

aside one hour to pray the greatest prayer and act of worship. We need to thank God for the other 167 hours God allows us to enjoy in the course of a week. For those who say they love God, that shouldn't be asking too much.

On the topic of love of neighbor, I want to tell a little story: One time the famous rabbi Hillel was challenged to teach the whole Torah (the Law of God) while he stood on one foot. Hillel responded by saying; "What you hate for yourself, do not do to your neighbor. This is the whole Law; the rest is commentary."

Sometimes when we watch the news or get our mail or read the paper, we feel as if we want to help everyone. But is that realistic? Sometimes our love of others is too limited, but sometimes it's our resources in terms of time and money that are limited. We can't beat ourselves up because we can't do everything for everybody. We can only do what it is possible for us to do.

I came across a brief article in Reader's Digest which I thought might be useful for married couples to help them in their love for each other. The article reported on a psychological study that followed the lives of 373 couples. Half of them were divorced after 20 years. This statistic is not a surprise. The top things the divorced couples said they learned that might have saved their marriage were: 1) show you care: 15 % of the divorced people regretted not giving their spouse more affection. 2) communication: express yourself: 41 % of divorced individuals say they wish they had communicated better by asking questions and revealing more about themselves and their feelings. Communication about money is also important. Nearly half of the individuals said they fought over money. Talk money often, not just when taxes or bills come along. 3) Let the past go: divorced people realized that jealousy can eat away at the happiness in their present relationship. One way to let go of an old flame is to write a letter (but then burn it). (RD, Nov. 2012.) Love is more than glorious feelings. Sometimes it requires a heroic amount of self-giving, but most of the time I think it's a lot of simple, practical things we do. Amen.

32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time– B Cycle

November 11, 2012

INTRODUCTION: [I Kings 17,10-16; Hebrews 9,24-28; Mark 12,38-44]

I want to begin by saying something about the second reading. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews was interested in showing the superiority of Jesus' sacrifice over Old Testament sacrifices. The author of the Letter especially focuses on the most important Jewish sacrifice in the entire year, the sacrifice offered on the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur). The Jewish Temple existed for around 1000 years, and while sacrifices were offered every day, there was one special day on which the High Priest, and only the High Priest, entered the Holy of Holies, the innermost sanctuary of the Temple. At no other time during the year could anyone enter the Holy of Holies. The High Priest would sprinkle the blood of animals in that Holy Place and ask forgiveness for his sins and those of the people of Israel. Part of the ceremony involved the High Priest holding his hands over a goat and placing the sins of the people on this goat. The goat

was then taken into the desert to die, symbolizing that the people's sins were gone. This is where the word "scape goat" comes from. It was a day when all of Israel would pray and would fast from food and drink. Even though there is no Temple, Jews still fast on that day and spend extra time in prayer asking God to forgive their sins. The Letter to the Hebrews emphasizes that Christ's sacrifice for sins took place only once and it didn't need to be offered again and again since it was a perfect sacrifice. We participate in this perfect sacrifice of Christ each time we come to Mass.

Our first reading will make more sense if we know that the events that are described in the reading happened during a severe famine. We have to marvel at the faith of the widow in our first reading, a faith that is reflected in the offering of another poor widow in today's gospel.

HOMILY: The showiness of some of the Jewish leaders is contrasted with the humility of a poor widow. Jesus does not tell us all Jewish leaders were that way, wearing fancy dress, looking for recognition and preferential treatment, but surely some were. Jesus does not tell us that those who made generous offerings to the Temple were show-offs (although they could hardly hide the loud noise their many coins would make as they fell into the metallic offering boxes that stood in the court of the Temple. Our parishioner and expert on currency, Gene Hessler, informs us in his book on the subject that paper money would not be around for several more centuries. Jesus did not condemn those who gave generously. Their generous gifts kept the Temple in good repair and supported the priests and Levites who ministered daily. There is nothing wrong with having a beautiful space dedicated to the worship of God. Jesus had great respect for the Temple. We like to have a beautiful church to remind us of God's grandeur and to inspire us to know we are in a special place. The person, however, who most impressed Jesus was not a person who gave lots of gold but a poor widow who gave two little coins worth about two or three cents. It reminds us that when we come to church what Jesus notices most about us is the love that's in our hearts. It also reminds us that we can't judge one another.

We are all affected by people's behavior - in that it is prayerful, pleasing, respectful or that it is distracting and annoying. That is not being judgmental, it's just stating how I am affected by something. But we can't judge another's heart. Only Jesus can. Just as the woman in our first reading was blessed by her kindness to the prophet, we can be sure that whatever love we bring with us to offer to God will be blessed abundantly by the God of love. Jesus said anyone who gives even a cup of cold water in his name will not lose his or her reward.

I think today would be a great opportunity to thank our people for their generosity to St. Boniface. I have been overwhelmed by the generosity of so many of our people - since last year when we had an appeal for increased offertory support and this year for our capital campaign to brighten up the church and take about 50 years of dirt off the walls and ceiling. So I thank you and assure you the Lord, who will not allow us to surpass him in generosity and who generously gave himself for us, will bless you generously for your goodness. Amen.

33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time – B Cycle

Nov. 18, 2012

INTRODUCTION: (Daniel 12,1-3; Heb 10,11-14; Mk 13,24-32) Most of us, I am sure, are familiar with the last book of the Bible: the Book of Revelation. Since the entire New Testament was originally written in Greek, and the Book of Revelation began with the Greek word “apocalypses,” which means revelation, the book is also referred to as the Apocalypse. What most people do not know is there are a number of other passages in the Bible that are apocalyptic in nature; that is, they reveal to God’s people what is going to take place. Usually they were written during a time when God’s people were being persecuted. They tried to give hope to God’s people that if they remained faithful to God their sufferings would soon be at an end and God, or perhaps God’s delegate, the Messiah, would overcome God’s enemies and would initiate an era of peace. This era was known as God’s reign or God’s kingdom. Our first reading today, from the Book of Daniel, written about 165 BC, is an example of apocalyptic writing. It was a time of Jewish persecution. Preceding today’s reading, the Book of Daniel describes several visions Daniel had about the immediate future of God’s people. The vision predicted that the Syrians would try to destroy the faith of the Jewish people and would persecute and kill those Jews who were faithful. The time was described as “unsurpassed in distress.” Today’s passage predicts that during that time the Archangel Michael, the guardian of the Jews, would come to the aid of God’s people. The passage contains a clear belief in resurrection to glory for those who remained faithful and a resurrection to ignominy for those who had not.

HOMILY: In my introduction I spoke of apocalyptic writing in the Book of Revelation and in the Book of Daniel. Today’s gospel is also apocalyptic in nature. Jesus would have spoken these words during a time when the Jews were subject to Roman rule and they sought their independence. Mark would have recalled these words of Jesus some 35 or 40 years later as he was writing his gospel for his community of Christians who were suffering persecution from both the Romans and the Jews. These words were meant to assure Jesus’ listeners as well as Mark’s community that Jesus would return again and usher in the kingdom of God, an era of everlasting peace for those who have remained faithful. The first half of today’s gospel uses images from the Old Testament: images of the universe decomposing, the sun and moon growing dark and the stars falling from the sky, the Son of Man appearing in power and glory and gathering together his chosen ones. The second half of our gospel attempts to assure God’s people that their sufferings would not last much longer. Their expectation was that Jesus would return very soon and their suffering would be over. I think perhaps that is what Jesus is speaking symbolically when he says, “this generation will not pass away before all these things come to pass.” Even though Jesus is encouraging perseverance in our faith and wants us to know the suffering will end soon, he also adds no one knows when it will come. It is necessary to be ready for it - a message that is repeated a number of times in the gospels.

I want to say a word about another group of Jews who lived roughly 200 years before Christ and who were probably annihilated by the Romans around the year 70 AD (the same year the

Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed). I'm talking about the Essenes. They were an apocalyptic community living in the desert near the Dead Sea. They were preparing by prayer and study and asceticism for the coming of God's kingdom. They looked forward to the coming of two Messiahs, one a priest, a descendant of Aaron and one a king, a descendant of David. The group regarded themselves as the last generation of people on earth. Their War Scroll indicates they would participate in the conflict at the end of days that would occur between the sons of light and the sons of darkness. The redeemed, primarily the Essenes, who referred to themselves as the Yahad, would dwell in everlasting joy in eternity.

I mention this because an exhibit just opened at the Museum Center displaying some of the Essenes' writings, documents that are about 2000 years old and older. These documents, called the Dead Sea Scrolls, make up a collection of about 600 manuscripts, consisting of about 10 complete scrolls and thousands of fragments. I am holding a 600 page book of translations of the various scrolls. You can see from this how much material became available to the world in 1947 when the scrolls were first discovered (quite by accident). This is amazing when we realize that before 1947, when the Dead Sea Scrolls were found, the oldest known copy of any Old Testament Hebrew manuscript was written in 895 AD (the Cairo Prophets). Now we have manuscripts that are 1000 years older than the oldest one we knew. These documents are not only important because of their antiquity but also because they shed light on a whole segment of the Jewish population at the time of Jesus whom we had previously known about only through a few comments by historians. John the Baptist may actually have been a part of this group at one time. With the Scrolls we know a great deal more about the time and culture when Jesus lived.

There is no way all these documents will be on display at the Museum Center. I haven't seen the exhibit yet, but I did see it when I was in Jerusalem. Even though you won't be able to read the Hebrew or Aramaic in which most of the Scrolls were written, it's still awesome to see and it's interesting to hear the story of how they were found. They do have a connection with Cincinnati. When it looked like Israel would be in a war in 1969, Nelson Glueck, president of the Hebrew Union College (HUC), was commissioned to take photographs of the scrolls and keep the negatives. For 20 years these negatives (1500 of them) were kept secret here in Cincinnati. When the team of scholars who were supposed to be translating the Scrolls took so long to come out with a translation, a scholar named Hershel Shanks gave a lecture here in Cincinnati and revealed the secret about the existence of the negatives for the Scrolls. A professor at HUC and a student began translating the Scrolls and published their work. This got things going with the academic community. There is so much more that could be said, but if you get to visit the exhibit, you'll learn a lot more. Amen.

Feast of Christ the King – B Cycle

Nov. 25, 2012

INTRODUCTION Last week I spoke about apocalyptic writing and its intent to give hope and encouragement to God's people during difficult times. The Book of Revelation, aka the Apocalypse in the New Testament, and the Book of Daniel in the Old Testament are examples of apocalyptic writing. Again this week we hear from the book of Daniel. This book was written during a time when the Jews were being severely persecuted for their faith. As in all apocalyptic writing, today's reading describes how God would triumph in the end. God would establish a kingdom, which would replace all other kingdoms and God's kingdom would be everlasting. God is here described as "the Ancient One." His kingdom would be ruled by one who is described as "a son of man." God would give this "son of man" dominion, glory and kingship. The term "son of man" means literally a human being, but today's passage gives new meaning and mystery to this expression. You might recall "son of man" was the favorite title Jesus used to describe himself.

HOMILY The other morning I woke up asking myself this bizarre question: "What would I do if I alone had knowledge of where some weapons of mass destruction were hidden and I were captured by terrorists who were torturing me to get me to tell them where the weapons were hidden? Would I give in and tell them?" The idea was frightening – probably prompted by a crazy dream, but I answered my own question: I could never give away such information that would cause harm for so many people.

Then an opposite idea struck me: "What if I had some knowledge that I knew would help millions of people, but my life would be endangered were I to reveal that knowledge? Would I reveal it anyway?" Of course.

Maybe I was having delusions of grandeur, but this thought gave me some insight into Jesus' death. He had a vision and a knowledge that he was certain would save billions of people. This is why he came, to share with us what he knew about the kingdom of God. What he announced would allow people to participate in this kingdom forever. He began his public ministry proclaiming God's kingdom - that it was near at hand. He demonstrated that he spoke with power and authority through expelling demons, healing sick people, feeding hungry crowds, calming storms, walking on water and even raising some people back to life. Everything about him proved that he was not some kind of a nut case. Some people decided that he was crazy when he talked about the Eucharist and they walked away from him. But he was attracting enough people that those in power felt their position threatened and they knew the only way they could silence him was to have him put to death. They took him before the one person who had power to execute him, Pontius Pilate. However, Jesus could not stop proclaiming his message for he knew his message was too important to the world. People needed to hear it no matter what the consequences. To proclaim the kingdom of God was what he came for and he was its king. "For this I was born, for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth," he told the Roman procurator.

Often when we read about or hear about things going on in the news, we ask “where are you God?” “Why are these things happening?” We forget his kingdom does not belong to this world, but it does exist. Our challenge is to believe in the kingdom, to believe in its king and to follow the way he has shown us.

I thank all of you for being here today, for your faith, for responding to Jesus’ invitation enter to into his kingdom and for the support your faith gives to me and to others who are traveling the road to eternal life along with you. I am grateful to be in your company as we make that journey together. Amen.