

Fourteenth Ordinary – A Cycle

July 6, 2014

INTRODUCTION – (*Zechariah 9,9-10; Romans 8,9.11-13; Matthew 11,25-30*) Two hundred thirty-eight years ago, we declared our independence from the English. This was a courageous step on the part of our ancestors and our freedom has been threatened in many ways through these years. Somehow we have managed to keep going, and with God's blessings, we will continue on. May we use our freedom with responsibility and may God bless our land.

Two hundred thirty-eight years is a long time. When we hear from Zechariah in today's first reading, it had been three hundred years since the Jews had known freedom. They lost their independence when they were conquered by the Babylonians and taken into exile for 50 years. Then the Persians destroyed the Babylonian empire and allowed the Jews to return to their homes. Alexander the Great conquered the Persians and, during this Hellenistic period, the Jews were bitterly persecuted. Scholars believe that it was during this period of Greek rule that Zechariah, as God's prophet, promises better days. He tells Jerusalem to rejoice for their king would come to bring them freedom and peace. Since kings were anointed, they were called in Hebrew "Messiah" and in Greek "Christos" which means "the anointed one." Horses, chariots, warriors' bows and other instruments of war would be outlawed in his kingdom. The people of Jerusalem remembered this prophecy when Jesus came riding into Jerusalem on a donkey on Palm Sunday and they shouted to him Hosanna – which means "save us." This reading was chosen to correspond with today's gospel, where Jesus reveals himself as a man of peace who is meek and humble of heart. I wonder will we ever experience in this life the peace Jesus came to bring us or will we have to wait until we experience it in the kingdom of heaven?

HOMILY – Each year, during Ordinary Time, the Church chooses a gospel reading from Matthew, Mark or Luke. This is the year of Matthew. The continuous reading from each gospel is always interrupted by the Lenten and Easter seasons. When we last heard from Matthew, Jesus was preaching the Sermon on the Mount. This Sunday we pick up Matthew again several chapters later.

A couple called the priest's house asking if they could get married at the church. The priest explained what it would be necessary for them to do, including that they would have to go through some premarital counseling. The caller said, "Oh, we don't need that, we've both been married several times before." They just didn't get it!

At issue in today's gospel is "who is getting Jesus' message?" It's not the towns, he tells us, where he had worked many miracles and did a lot of preaching: Capernaum, Bethsaida, Chorazin. It's not the leaders in the Jewish religion, the Scribes and Pharisees, the disciples sometimes didn't seem to get it too, although they continued to stay with him. The ones who got it were the ordinary people, simple uneducated people, the "little ones" as it is translated in today's gospel. They were the ones who

accepted what Jesus said, and Jesus was pleased that some did. We are often told that Jesus prayed, but seldom are we told what was the content of his prayer. This is one of the few times we can listen in on his prayers; he is thanking his father that some people have responded to his message.

And what was his message? Jesus received his message directly from the Father. "All things have been handed over to me by my Father." It is a message that cannot be ignored, for to ignore it, is to ignore both Jesus and the Father.

Those who find life burdensome are especially invited to accept Jesus' message. He does not promise he will make life easy; as a matter of fact, he tells us elsewhere in Matthew's gospel: "if anyone would come after me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow me." (Mt. 16,24) He does, however, tell us he will make our burdens bearable. "Come to me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me..." The yoke symbolizes Jesus would support us in our struggles. This symbol of a yoke is generally interpreted as a contrast with the burdens of the Jewish law, which was loaded down with many minute obligations that in the end the ordinary person could not observe them all. What Jesus tells us can apply to the ordinary burdens and anxieties of everyday life. When problems weigh heavily on us, or even if they don't, he wants us to "come" to him and "learn" from him. How do we do that? It is not rocket science. We come to him through prayer and the sacraments. We learn of him by reading the scriptures, not only the ones we enjoy but even scriptures that challenge us. The culture we live in tends to pick and choose, hearing what people want to hear from our Lord and ignoring the more challenging parts. Everything that Christ taught us is important, for it is God's word to us showing us a way that anyone can follow, a way that leads to eternal life and eternal joy. Amen.

Fifteenth Ordinary – A Cycle

July 13, 2014

INTRODUCTION (*Isaiah 55,10-11; Romans 8,18-23; Matthew 13,1-9 or 1-23*) In today's first reading, the prophet speaks to God's captive people in Babylon (Iraq). After 50 years God began telling them, through the prophet, that their years of captivity and slavery to the Babylonians would soon be ended. They would be able to return to Israel, to their cities, their homes and their farms. Many doubted this could be true. In today's passage God is assuring them his promise will be fulfilled. God compares his word to the rain and the snow. When God sends moisture to the earth, it does the work of keeping the world green and alive. When God sends out his word, it is not full of empty promises; it is effective and powerful and is able to accomplish what it was sent to do. God's word was true, as roughly 50 years after the exile, the Persians (Iran) destroyed the Babylonian empire and allowed the Jews to return home. In today's gospel parable we are presented with another way of thinking of the power of the word of God: as a seed.

HOMILY A family were on vacation, and as they rode down the highway there was a big sign that read: Road Closed. They maneuvered around the sign and continued on. Suddenly the road ended and there was an even larger sign: "What part of 'Road Closed?' didn't you understand?" (*Reader's Digest, Laughter Really is the Best Medicine, pg 171*) In today's gospel Jesus tells us that's why he uses parables, to help those who have trouble understanding his teachings understand what they need to know to be saved.

Today and for the next two Sundays we will hear several of Jesus' parables about the kingdom of heaven. Today's parable and the explanation that goes with it is very clear. God's word is like a seed which can produce life, but if it falls on deaf ears, it produces nothing. It was what Jesus experienced as he traveled from one place to another, teaching. Certainly from the time of Adam and Eve there have been people who hear God's word, and they respond to it like the hardened earth, or stony ground or ground thick with weeds.

A good story, however, can often have several interpretations. So I wish to suggest another way we can look at the parable, a way that might enhance our own spiritual growth. Instead of thinking of the field as all of human kind, think of the entire field as representing just yourself. If I see just myself as the field, I see that sometimes I am closed to God's word, sometimes I get very enthusiastic but my enthusiasm has no depth, sometimes my life is so cluttered with things I have to do or want to do, that I have no time left for God. But sometimes my heart and mind is like the rich soil, and I take God's word in and serve him genuinely and faithfully. Looking at the parable that way, I see in myself hardened paths, stony ground and weeds, but I see also good soil. And I see I have the freedom to determine how well God's word will take root in me by changing what I can in my life so there is more good soil in my heart and mind for the seed of God's word to fall upon.

As we pray today, let us ask God to help us see where in our lives God's grace is having a hard time taking root. Amen.

Sixteenth Ordinary – A Cycle

July 20, 2014

INTRODUCTION: Our first reading today is from the book of Wisdom, a book of the bible written about 100 years before Christ. At the time, the Jews were being persecuted for their faith by the Greeks. As a consequence, many Jews were giving up their belief in God and converting to the pagan religion and the culture of the Greeks. The author of this book is struggling with the question: "why is God allowing this evil to go on?" His conclusion is that God's way is not to destroy, but to be patient and to lead people to repent. The theme prepares us for the gospel, which also deals with the problem of evil.

HOMILY: Rabbi Harold Kushner writes in his book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*: “Life is not fair. The wrong people get sick and the wrong people get robbed and the wrong people get killed in wars and in accidents.” He tells us some people see unfairness and conclude there is no God. Rabbi Kushner argues that the sense of unfairness, the sense of anger and indignation and injustice and sympathy that we feel when these things happen, are in themselves the surest proof of God’s reality, for these feelings are planted in our hearts by a God who recognizes unfairness and injustice, who feels anger and indignation and sympathy. But our God is also a patient God who is not ready to come down and destroy his creation for every sin and evil he sees, rather he is ready to come down to call us to holiness and to save us. If God zapped a person every time someone stepped out of line, how many of us would be left? All of what I have been saying is just one attempt among many to understand evil in the world and in our lives. Today’s parable of the wheat and the weeds also attempts to find an answer to this mystery.

We don’t need to be told there are weeds in God’s kingdom. We all know that. The church and its leaders are not always perfect. I like to quote Fr. Andrew Greeley who once said “if you ever find a perfect church, by all means join it; just know that once you join it, it will no longer be perfect.” Imperfection is all around us, in our nation and other nations, in our friends and members of our family. The important lesson in today’s parable is that in the end all things will be made right. The wheat, the good, will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father and those who do evil, the weeds, will endure the flames of a fiery furnace. The parable tells us God is the one who is going to make that judgment, but I believe that before we stand before God, we will probably have judged ourselves when we look at how we lived. I believe God will be more merciful on us than we are on ourselves, for as the first reading says in its prayer to God: “Though you are master of might, you judge with clemency, and with much lenience you govern us.”

The parable of the wheat and the weeds along with the other two little parables (the mustard seed and the leaven/yeast) are optimistic ones, assuring us that in spite of opposition and persecution the kingdom shall continue growing as well as assuring us of final victory over evil in the end. I think today’s parable needs to be heard by our modern culture that tries to tell us that everyone will be saved in the end, no matter whether they were good or evil. The gospel tells us the opposite. Karma is real. The other thing that many people today want to believe is there is no devil. Call it what you will, it is obvious there is a driving force for evil in the world. Personally I believe there is a real devil or devils because I have seen how they operate.

The word for weeds in today’s gospel is ξιξάνια, a specific weed that looks like wheat when it begins to grow, but of course it is only a weed. Sometimes that’s the way evil inserts itself into our world, it has the appearance of something good, but it is no good. Just because it looks good doesn’t mean it is.

To sum up what I’ve said: evil will always remain a mystery, and we’ll always be struggling against it and struggling to understand it. Don’t let its appearance as

something good fool you, remember there will be a day of reckoning, there is an invisible force for evil in the world, and God's good kingdom will prevail and overcome all evil in the end. Let's live and pray that we're all on the winning side. Amen.

Seventeenth Ordinary – A Cycle

July 27, 2014

INTRODUCTION – (*1 Kings 3,5.7-12; Romans 8,28-30;Matthew 13,44-52*) When King David died, his son, Solomon, succeeded him as king of Israel. Today's first reading is Solomon's prayer as he begins his reign. He prayed for an understanding heart that he would reign well. Just think, of all the possible gifts he could have asked for, he chose to ask for wisdom. Observance of God's commands will lead us to wisdom, thus in our reflection on our first reading we praise God in the psalm refrain for his commands and for the wisdom they impart to us.

HOMILY – A woman found a lamp and as she examined it out popped a genie. "Do I get three wishes?" she asked. "Nope, I'm a one-wish genie. What will it be?" She pulled out a map and said "see this map? I want these countries to stop fighting so we can have world peace." "They've been fighting for many centuries. I'm not that good. What else do you have?" the genie asked the lady. "Well, I'd like a good man. One who's considerate, loves kids, is filthy rich, likes to cook, and doesn't watch sports all day." "Okay," the genie said with a sigh. "Let me see that map again." (*from Reader's Digest: Laughter Really is the Best Medicine,pg 62*)

What would we ask for if God or a one-wish genie appeared to us? When Solomon asked for wisdom it shows he was already wise. Unfortunately he didn't keep using his wisdom to serve God's people well. He married too many wives and spent the country into bankruptcy, so much so that when he died the county split into two kingdoms, pretty much isolating the kings who were descendants of David and Solomon. I felt I needed to add that part about Solomon, because having wisdom does not mean we will always make good use of it. Let us return now to today's gospel. This is the third week now we have been hearing parables about the Kingdom of Heaven. What would we be willing to spend all of our money on, like the people in today's gospel? We may think the parables of the treasure and the pearl need no explanation. Certainly Heaven will be all that we could ever desire and more so. But there is a subtle message here that we must not miss. Notice the persons who discovered the treasure and the pearl made it their highest priority. Nothing else was more important. Our search for the kingdom of God has to be our highest priority. Everything we have attained in life or might attain will give us some satisfaction and happiness, but everything is temporary. Entering into the Kingdom of heaven which Jesus has revealed to us is happiness forever. What could be more important than that?

The parable of the fishing net that gathered up good fish as well as bad is very similar to the parable of the wheat and the weeds. Its message is to trust in God's final judgment and to be patient until that time comes. The perennial problem of evil in the world will

be resolved. We have to be careful not to give these parables an interpretation that supports John Calvin's form of predestination. It is true, the wheat and the weeds as well as with the good fish and the bad represent two types of things of superior and inferior quality. John Calvin, the founder of Calvinism would argue God creates people that way too and there's nothing any of us can do to change it. In Calvin's view God creates us destined to either heaven or hell, and we cannot change our destiny. To think that way would contradict the entire message of the gospel. We are called to holiness and we have a free will to choose God's grace or to disregard it. Remember it is in Matthew's gospel that we read the account of the Last Judgment where the "Son of Man" will separate peoples of all nations inviting one group to enter the kingdom of Heaven and commanding the other to depart from him into the everlasting fire. It is on this basis that they are separated: on the basis of "what you have done for the least of my brothers and sisters you did it for me." Weeds can't change their nature, nor can fish that are inedible, but because we are human with a free will, we can change ourselves, with God's help, when our life is going in the wrong direction.

The correct way to think of "predestination" is that we are all predestined to heaven, a place "prepared for us from the beginning of the world" as Jesus calls it (Mt. 25,34), but the gospels tell us not everyone lives up to the destiny God has created them for.

There is a strange image at the end of the parable about the fish, that the bad fish will be thrown into a furnace of fire. Usually bad fish are just thrown back into the water. This image of being thrown into a furnace of fire and the weeping and gnashing of teeth is symbolic language for eternal suffering.

Jesus asked his disciples "Have you understood all these things?" Let us pray for the wisdom to understand, not as with the wisdom of Solomon but with the wisdom of a faithful disciple of Jesus. Amen.