

**19<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (Cycle A)**  
**August 7, 2011 -- Deacon Bill Nourse, Ed.D.**

I used to travel quite a bit on business. When I was traveling like that I often made it a point to take time to see whatever there was to be seen wherever I happened to be, especially if I didn't expect to be there ever again.

In Hartford, Connecticut, I got to see Gordie Howe play hockey, his last season in the NHL, when he was about 51 years old. What a guy.

I also visited Mark Twain's house in Hartford. He lived next door to Harriet Beecher Stowe. I remember two things about his house that relate to today's readings.

One thing I remember about Mark Twain's house was a quotation on the fire screen, by Ralph Waldo Emerson:

"The Ornament of a House is the Friends who Frequent it."

There's a lot of truth in that.

The other thing is that Twain's house had a telephone, but it was installed in a tiny cramped area under the staircase. Twain supposedly said that there was a hot place in hell reserved for the man who invented the telephone. Sometimes I think I know exactly what he meant.

I often think about that when I'm driving, or shopping, or doing pretty much anything else in Memphis. It never ceases to amaze me that certain people simply cannot do ANYTHING without talking on the telephone at the same time. I'll see someone driving erratically, or blocking the aisle in the supermarket . . . and sure enough, they're on the phone, oblivious to all that surrounds them. What can be really disconcerting is the people who use those hands-free earpieces. You can't be sure whether they're on the phone or talking to themselves.

I have a theory about this. I think some people simply cannot bear to be alone. They have to surround themselves with noise . . . maybe to

avoid having to be face-to-face with themselves. Or maybe to avoid having to hear that still, small voice that might cause them to THINK.

Which brings us to today's first reading. The idea here is that God is not in the strong and heavy wind that was rending the mountains and crushing rocks . . . God is not in the earthquake . . . God is not in the fire . . . but after the fire, there was a tiny whispering sound.

How can you hear the tiny whispering sound if you're on the phone all the time?

God is not going to call you on the phone. Hang up and drive.

Today's first reading and today's Gospel are both about theophanies – manifestations of God in the physical world, in natural phenomena. The prophet Elijah is running for his life from the death threats of Jezebel – it can be dangerous to speak the truth. Elijah stops to rest in a cave on Mount Horeb, God's mountain. That's when all the commotion starts, that we hear in today's first reading.

Elijah recognizes the voice of God . . . not in the mighty hurricane, or the crashing of rocks, or the earthquake, or the fire . . . but in a tiny whispering sound. In his prayer with the Lord, Elijah receives new instructions for his mission. If he'd been on the phone, I guess he'd still be sitting in that cave, wondering what to do in between phone calls.

In today's Gospel, the apostles see Jesus in command of the laws of nature. After praying for hours, Jesus walks on the water towards the apostles in the middle of a violent storm. But the storm subsides when Jesus reaches the boat where the apostles are.

Peter wants to walk on water too. Jesus encourages him, but Peter is too afraid, even though Jesus gives him the power to do it.

Today's readings tell us that both Elijah and Jesus pray. In many places in the Gospels, we see that Jesus spent long hours in prayer. He encouraged his disciples to pray intensely. An essential part of Christian life is to set aside time exclusively for prayer, to turn our minds and hearts to the presence and the purposes of God – and we

have to turn off the phone . . . and the TV, and the radio, and the video games, and all the rest of it . . . so we can listen for that tiny whispering sound.

There are several reasons why we pray. We pray to acknowledge God's Lordship in our lives, to thank him for all that we receive, to ask for what we need, and to pray for the physical and spiritual needs of others. If we listen for that tiny whispering sound, prayer can also enlighten and strengthen our spirit to understand God's wisdom and to live accordingly.

For some people, prayer is just kind of a routine habit. For others, it is a lucky charm – if I don't say this prayer, and make ten copies and leave them in the church, something bad might happen. For some people, prayer is a last resort when everything else has failed and there is no other option. For some people, it may be little more than an obligatory break in the busy world, the fever of our daily activities.

Perhaps, even for those in religious life, prayer can come to be seen only as an obligation to be fulfilled conscientiously. Gotta punch that ticket every day. There may be other people who intermittently feel moved to prayer, but do not know how to pray when they try. Deep down there may be a basic lack of understanding of what prayer is, how one can really pray, and what purpose prayer really serves. It may be that what is missing is the vital experience of real prayer.

When we see through the illusions of our invented securities, we may perhaps feel the true state of our human condition: confusion over what we do not understand, and fear for what may happen to us and to those we love. These sentiments can move us to really depend on the God we claim to believe in and to rely on.

Prayer is a lot of things. Above all, it's a search for an experience of God in our lives. Sometimes, we can experience God in prayer . . . it's an experience that for one short moment, can change our lives, our desires and our priorities forever.

To experience God in prayer we need to take prayer seriously. We need to leave all other concerns behind, and to turn our mind and heart to search for God in prayer. That is hard to do. Many people

trying to improve their prayer life complain of constant distractions. This happens because we are not used to the act of contemplation – our minds flit from one random idea to another. If we work at it, we can slowly learn to turn our minds to the reality of God’s presence, and begin to focus and concentrate and prepare ourselves to engage God through prayer.

God reveals himself to us in prayer, not the other way around. He already knows us – there’s nothing for us to reveal. But in a sense, God requires and depends on our proper dispositions for us to know Him.

Somehow, I don’t think Mark Twain prayed very much. However, he did write a remarkable little book entitled “The War Prayer.” That one would make a homily all by itself. I’d encourage you to find it on the Internet and read it slowly. “The War Prayer,” by Mark Twain.

My personal favorite composed prayer is the prayer of Cardinal Newman. There’s a framed copy on my bedroom wall, and I often include it as part of my night prayer:

O Lord, support us all the day long,  
Till the shadows lengthen,  
and the evening comes,  
and the busy world is hushed,  
and the fever of life is over,  
and our work is done.

Then in your mercy,  
grant us a safe lodging, and a holy rest,  
and peace at the last.

Amen.

## READINGS

### Reading 1

1 Kgs 19:9a, 11-13a

At the mountain of God, Horeb,  
Elijah came to a cave where he took shelter.  
Then the LORD said to him,  
“Go outside and stand on the mountain before the LORD;  
the LORD will be passing by.”  
A strong and heavy wind was rending the mountains  
and crushing rocks before the LORD—  
but the LORD was not in the wind.  
After the wind there was an earthquake—  
but the LORD was not in the earthquake.  
After the earthquake there was fire—  
but the LORD was not in the fire.  
After the fire there was a tiny whispering sound.  
When he heard this,  
Elijah hid his face in his cloak  
and went and stood at the entrance of the cave.

### Responsorial Psalm

85:9, 10, 11-12, 13-14

**R. (8) Lord, let us see your kindness, and grant us your salvation.**

I will hear what God proclaims;  
the LORD — for he proclaims peace.  
Near indeed is his salvation to those who fear him,  
glory dwelling in our land.

**R. Lord, let us see your kindness, and grant us your salvation.**

Kindness and truth shall meet;  
justice and peace shall kiss.  
Truth shall spring out of the earth,  
and justice shall look down from heaven.

**R. Lord, let us see your kindness, and grant us your salvation.**

The LORD himself will give his benefits;  
our land shall yield its increase.  
Justice shall walk before him,  
and prepare the way of his steps.

**R. Lord, let us see your kindness, and grant us your salvation.**

### Reading II

Rom 9:1-5

Brothers and sisters:  
I speak the truth in Christ, I do not lie;  
my conscience joins with the Holy Spirit in bearing me witness  
that I have great sorrow and constant anguish in my heart.  
For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ  
for the sake of my own people,  
my kindred according to the flesh.  
They are Israelites;  
theirs the adoption, the glory, the covenants,  
the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises;  
theirs the patriarchs, and from them,

according to the flesh, is the Christ,  
who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.

**Gospel**

Mt 14:22-33

After he had fed the people, Jesus made the disciples get into a boat  
and precede him to the other side,  
while he dismissed the crowds.

After doing so, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray.

When it was evening he was there alone.

Meanwhile the boat, already a few miles offshore,  
was being tossed about by the waves, for the wind was against it.

During the fourth watch of the night,  
he came toward them walking on the sea.

When the disciples saw him walking on the sea they were terrified.

“It is a ghost,” they said, and they cried out in fear.

At once Jesus spoke to them, “Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid.”

Peter said to him in reply,

“Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.”

He said, “Come.”

Peter got out of the boat and began to walk on the water toward Jesus.

But when he saw how strong the wind was he became frightened;

and, beginning to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me!”

Immediately Jesus stretched out his hand and caught Peter,

and said to him, “O you of little faith, why did you doubt?”

After they got into the boat, the wind died down.

Those who were in the boat did him homage, saying,

“Truly, you are the Son of God.”