

22nd SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME (Cycle A)

August 31, 2008 – Deacon Bill Nourse, Ed.D.

Not long ago, I read a book that I borrowed from the parish library. It was entitled “Why Did I Do That?” It was about a sort of a Catch-22 that many of us deal with every day, I suppose – why do we do what we do? Why do we do what we do, instead of what we ought to do? When we know very well what we should be doing, why do we do something else instead, usually the opposite of what we ought to do?

Why am I wasting my time watching this stupid television show, AGAIN? What am I doing with this cigarette in my hand? Did I “forget” to pray again this week? Why didn’t I go to the gym, AGAIN today? Why did that box of Little Debbie Oatmeal Cream Pies fall into my shopping basket at Kroger?

I don’t know about you, but I can resist anything . . . except temptation.

So, we try to do better. We try to do what we know we should do, and stick with it. But then our thoughts stray to how much easier it would be if we just took the easy way out. Sometimes we even whine about it. That’s what the prophet Jeremiah is doing in today’s first reading.

He’s complaining bitterly to the Lord. Jeremiah has become an object of derision and ridicule and scorn, all because he let the Lord deceive him into being a prophet. Jeremiah is being pretty honest about his feelings here – it’s a blunt acknowledgement of how difficult and unpleasant it can be to be faithful to God.

But in spite of it all, Jeremiah finds deep in himself a compulsion to go on. He feels a thirst to persevere in trying to do the work of God. It's his job – being a prophet.

We hear it again in the Psalm – how delight is to be found in a life lived in the presence of God: “As with the riches of a banquet shall my soul be satisfied”

Throughout Scripture, in both the Old and the New Testament, we are constantly reminded of the meaning of earthly existence and the true value of the things of earth. The Christian perspective on life is that we are pilgrims in a world that is not our true home. Earthly life is a pilgrimage, a sort of a rite of passage through a strange land, towards a Kingdom that is not of this world. We are indeed strangers in a strange land.

Living in the world, it's easy get used to the rhythm of things, to see time as a cycle – Summer, Fall, Winter, Spring . . . the Moon passes through its phases again and again . . . the tide comes in, the tide goes out . . . as it says in Ecclesiastes . . . “The sun rises and the sun goes down; then it presses on to the place where it rises. Blowing now toward the south, then toward the north, the wind turns again and again, resuming its rounds.”

But for us, time is not really the cyclical pattern we see in nature. For us, time is more of a spiral leading upwards towards the Kingdom, the Truth, the Living Word, our true home.

Part of our job as Christians is to keep an awareness of that – where we are going. If we are to move toward becoming who and what we really are, toward fulfilling our true natures, we must always be vigilant – to live with integrity, to be

always open to God and his truth. Eternal vigilance is the price of integrity, you might say. We need to work constantly to tear down those “false gods” we build in place of the true God – and replace them with the true image of God within us.

Every now and then, it seems that we experience a glimpse of the Kingdom, a flash of the Spirit touching us, something that makes everything else pale into insignificance. It comes to us unbidden, unexpected. I remember going through a sort of a spiritual “dry spell” some time ago. I just kept on keeping on, trying to do what I knew I was supposed to do – then, one Sunday morning, as I was carrying the Book of the Gospels in procession – there it was. Not something I can really describe or define – but there it was. It startled me at the time, but I’m sure now that it was an experience of God.

If we’re fortunate enough to have an experience like that, it helps keep us on track, it reminds us of our life’s work – the salvation of others. At the end of Mass, we are sent forth on our mission – to go in peace to love and serve the Lord. An important way in which we do that is service to others. Charity is the sign of our Christian life.

In our Gospel reading last Sunday, we heard Jesus praise and bless Peter for recognizing that he is the Messiah, the son of the living God. Attaboy, Peter! That was an experience of God! Then this Sunday, starting with the very next verse in the same Gospel, Jesus rebukes Peter for his failure to see what being the Messiah means – that he must suffer and die to be what he must be. Get thee behind me, Satan!

Suffering is part of the human condition. Suffering is part of what it means to be a Messiah. It's part of what it means to be a follower of the Messiah.

Jesus is warning his disciples of his coming clash with the “powers that be,” of his death and Resurrection. It's easy to see how confusing that would be for a group of men who didn't fully understand the mission of the Messiah in the first place. They had been following him, but they didn't yet understand what it really meant to follow him.

Jesus makes it pretty clear in today's Gospel. Take up the cross and follow him. Maybe it's more than “taking up” the cross – maybe it's more like “embracing” the cross, putting aside the things we'd rather have instead of the cross and choosing the cross instead.

Suffering shouldn't surprise us. It's part of who we are. It's an integral part of the earthly experience of God's life. Sometimes I think the Buddhists are onto something there – all life is suffering – suffering comes from earthly desire – the way to quench suffering is to quench earthly desire.

I've often thought that converts to Christianity have a deeper appreciation of the realities of the Christian faith more than those of us who have always been Christians. It seems that the converts have a deeper belief in a lot of the things that we have sort of grown used to.

It is said that the road to Hell is paved with good intentions. Probably, the road to Hell is also a smooth, wide, easy road . . . gentle curves, no sharp turns . . . no milestones . . . no signposts. None of it uphill. The easy way. No real effort required. Just stay in the middle of the road and stroll along

and enjoy the scenery. Why, you could almost do it in your sleep.

So, what would the road to Heaven be paved with? It's probably an unpaved gravel road. Lots of mud and potholes, hard to travel, sharp turns, mostly uphill. Not easy at all. But it's our road.

Jesus talks about "saving" and "losing" our lives. We "save" by saving them for ourselves alone – seeking our own fulfillment and happiness, instead of seeking to know what God has in mind for us. We "lose" our lives by devoting ourselves to others, forsaking our own self-interest.

READINGS

Reading 1

Jer 20:7-9

You duped me, O LORD, and I let myself be duped;
you were too strong for me, and you triumphed.
All the day I am an object of laughter;
everyone mocks me.

Whenever I speak, I must cry out,
violence and outrage is my message;
the word of the LORD has brought me
derision and reproach all the day.

I say to myself, I will not mention him,
I will speak in his name no more.
But then it becomes like fire burning in my heart,
imprisoned in my bones;
I grow weary holding it in, I cannot endure it.

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 63:2, 3-4, 5-6, 8-9

R. (2b) My soul is thirsting for you, O Lord my God.

O God, you are my God whom I seek;
for you my flesh pines and my soul thirsts
like the earth, parched, lifeless and without water.

R. My soul is thirsting for you, O Lord my God.

Thus have I gazed toward you in the sanctuary
to see your power and your glory,
For your kindness is a greater good than life;
my lips shall glorify you.

R. My soul is thirsting for you, O Lord my God.

Thus will I bless you while I live;
lifting up my hands, I will call upon your name.
As with the riches of a banquet shall my soul be satisfied,
and with exultant lips my mouth shall praise you.

R. My soul is thirsting for you, O Lord my God.

You are my help,
and in the shadow of your wings I shout for joy.
My soul clings fast to you;
your right hand upholds me.

R. My soul is thirsting for you, O Lord my God.

Reading II

Rom 12:1-2

I urge you, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God,
to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice,
holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship.
Do not conform yourselves to this age
but be transformed by the renewal of your mind,
that you may discern what is the will of God,
what is good and pleasing and perfect.

Gospel

Mt 16:21-27

Jesus began to show his disciples
that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer greatly
from the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes,
and be killed and on the third day be raised.
Then Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him,
“God forbid, Lord! No such thing shall ever happen to you.”
He turned and said to Peter,
“Get behind me, Satan! You are an obstacle to me.
You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do.”

Then Jesus said to his disciples,
“Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself,
take up his cross, and follow me.
For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it,
but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.
What profit would there be for one to gain the whole world
and forfeit his life?
Or what can one give in exchange for his life?
For the Son of Man will come with his angels in his Father’s glory,
and then he will repay all according to his conduct.”