

8th Sunday of Ordinary Time (A), February 27, 2011

Good morning! It's a delight to be here with you again, and to share a few reflections with you about our scriptures this morning. I must say right up front that I've been distracted all day, and our beautiful first reading gives a poignant image of why, since it talks about how God could never forget us, that God's love for us is even more tender than the love a mother has for the child in her womb. Well, since about 1 a.m. Saturday morning my oldest daughter Elizabeth has been in labor with her first child. And is still! Little Charlie, they're going to name him... Anyway, this Grampa has been short of sleep and in a bit of a fog! I will do my best here this morning.

As Fr. Tim and I have both pointed out before, in the last month our gospel selections have been from the Sermon on the Mount, beginning with the Beatitudes and continuing through chapters five, six, and seven of Matthew's gospel. It is here that Jesus sets the tone for his whole public ministry. And not only does Jesus speak with authority, he goes beyond the law itself, urging us to forgo even the anger or retaliation allowed by the law, to forgive as we would be forgiven, even to the point of loving our enemies and praying for those who would persecute us. He is really encouraging us to live as children of God.

And today's gospel fits seamlessly with that message. If we can really live as God's children, there won't be any conflict between serving God and mammon; and there won't be any need for worry about tomorrow's troubles. However, at times this gospel might feel a little unreal to us...

Because on a really nice day, this is a really nice Gospel. When Jupiter aligns with Mars and your biorhythms are up, you can really enjoy the birds and lilies and you can laugh with joy about tomorrow. But I might hesitate before quoting this gospel to a worried family at Childrens' Hospital. And if you were to hear this Gospel after losing your job, or hearing that your wife loves someone else, or after finding out that your child is on drugs, then you might wonder if Jesus lived in some parallel universe. Didn't Jesus know that the body will not survive if it doesn't eat and wear something? And obviously, growing up in a much warmer part of the world, Jesus never saw any carefree birds frozen in the snow, did he?

Or imagine getting a letter from your son in college: "Dear Mom and Dad: Today's Gospel reading was all about not worrying over things like food and clothing because God is going to give them to us anyway, and it takes our minds away from what really matters. That gave me a whole new perspective. From now on, I'm not going to worry about getting good grades, finding a job, etc. God knows that I need them and God will come through. Your loving son! P.S., In case God is slow getting back to me, I need \$850."

Well, Jesus often uses a well-placed exaggeration to help us stop and think. And the reason I played around with this a bit is because I know we DO play OUR internal games with scripture sometimes, because there's often a sharp point in the gospel that we want to avoid.

Take that opening paragraph: "No one can serve two masters...You cannot serve God and mammon." Mammon means money, or wealth, but it means more than that. The word comes from a Hebrew root that means "to entrust." Mammon came to mean "that in which one places ones trust." It became a substitute for God, an idol, a false god. We might tell ourselves, "Well,

I don't trust in wealth more than God"... but if that's so, how come it's so hard for us to give any substantial pieces of our wealth away?

Another sharp point in today's Gospel comes as Jesus identifies one of the signs of clinging to a false god: worry. A person devoted to an idol worries about it. "What will happen if I lose the thing that gives my life meaning?" For instance, many of us have been close to people who know that alcohol is ruining their lives -- but they cannot stand the thought of living without alcohol; it's become a false god.

Or consider something good, that we all do, even if we're retired: work! Work is a good thing. I know people, some right here at St. Bridget, who work 60 or 70 hours a week or more. For some, I have nothing but respect... our work can be a real calling from God. I know doctors and nurses who work that hard, and it's because they've heard a call to be healers, and I admire them for that. Fr. Tim -- you may not know this, but he's the hardest working priest I've ever been associated with, in my 42 years of working for the Church. Sometimes we work so hard because we've experienced a call. But sometimes our work is not that kind of calling in life, and goes way beyond meeting our basic needs... but we become driven... to pursue other false or illusive idols of success, or wealth, or security -- and with it then come the fears and worries that our gospel warns us about.

Last week Fr. Tim mentioned a really good book, "The Shack," and I want to echo his endorsement. The staff read this book and discussed it together; there are a couple of copies in our parish library. A little over halfway through the book, the main character, whose name is Mack, is having a heart-to-heart, face-to-face conversation with Jesus, about Mack's worrying and fretting about the future, and Mack asks Jesus why he does that. And Jesus tells him:

"It is your desperate attempt to get some control over something you can't control. It is impossible for you to take power over the future because the future isn't even real, nor will it ever be real, it will always be the future. You try to play God, imagining the evil that you fear becoming reality, and then you try to make plans and contingencies to avoid what you fear."

Mack thought a bit, and then asked, "So why do I have so much fear in my life?"

And so Jesus goes on, "Because you don't believe. You don't really know that God loves you. The person who lives by his fears will not find freedom in my love. I am not talking about rational fears regarding legitimate dangers, but imagined fears, and especially the projection of those fears into the future. To the degree that those fears have a place in your life, you neither believe I am good nor know deep in your heart that I love you. You might pray about my love, or talk about it; you might sing about it at church, but you don't know it."

Might Jesus be saying something like that to some of us today?

Today's gospel may feel a little unreal...but there's something here for all of us. As we meet the Lord today in our prayer and our Eucharist, let's ask for the help to look at our worry and fears. Let's ask Jesus to speak directly to our heart, to show us how deeply & personally God loves us.

Deacon Denny Duffell