

Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

February 4, 2024

As many of you know, our Sunday Readings follow a three-year cycle. The Gospel Readings for Cycles A, B, and C (as they are called) are dominated by passages from Matthew, Mark, and Luke, respectively. Readings from John get sprinkled across the three years depending on the liturgical season and the particular feast being celebrated. And our Second Readings are chosen somewhat randomly in order to ensure that a good portion of the New Testament gets covered over the course of three years.

However, the First Reading is selected in a somewhat different way, in that it is usually chosen to correspond thematically with the Gospel Reading. In other words, those two readings are often linked in a particular way, chosen in order to shed a similar light on some aspect of faith or discipleship, or to help us see the seamless continuity of the history of our salvation, or to assist us in understanding some attributes of God. The First Reading and the Gospel are meant (in a very real sense) to “work together”, helping us to have an experience of God through these Sacred texts.

And yet today, it may be difficult to see the connection between the two, for these readings seem to have little in common. In the reading from the Book of Job we see Job despairing after having to endure many hardships (at the hands of Satan, and with the “permission” of God no less!). With the exception of the story of Jesus’ passion and death, these few verses are probably the most somber, depressing verses we ever hear on Sunday.

Listen to how Job talks about his life:

**“Is not man’s life on earth a drudgery? . . .
He is a slave who longs for the shade . . .
misery . . . troubled nights . . .
restlessness . . . they (my days) come to**

**an end without hope . . .
I shall not see happiness again.”**

Wow. Not much to be said after that. It kind of speaks for itself.

But in the Gospel passage there is something entirely different on display. In the passage from St. Mark we see Jesus first curing Simon's mother-in-law, and then curing and driving out demons from all sorts of people who are brought to him. So what are we to make of these two readings? How are we to make sense of them? Why are these two readings on the same Sunday?

Well, it seems to me that these two holy readings place before you and me a choice, a choice that lies at the heart of being a person of faith. As you know, our actions almost always have consequences, they almost always shape our world or shape the lives of others in one way or another. They are rarely “neutral”, rarely have little impact. And if that is the case, we must ask ourselves an important question:

Am I the kind of person who adds to the burdens of others, or do I ease them?

The Book of Job is one of the richest stories in all of the Sacred Scripture, for it speaks about some very deep truths, truths which of course, are universal to human beings everywhere. We only have a small portion of the complete story in today's reading, but it is certainly worth reading in its entirety. However, when we hear this story (or read it) we should be careful not to take everything contained in it in a literal way, not presume that the story is all about the specific conversations between Satan and God and Job. Nor should we presume that God and Satan are playing some sort of “game” with Job.

Rather the heart of the story involves what Job comes to realize about life (as illustrated by the conversation between God and Job regarding God's inscrutability and sovereignty). As you might remember, toward the end of

the story God essentially points out to Job that he will never understand God's ways. That's not how it works. God is God, and we are not (as you've heard me say countless times before). And when Job begins to accept this fact, when he comes to this realization, his life changes.

The story tells of specific blessings he receives from God (children, wealth, etc. . .). And yet the real "gift" he received was a heart no longer fixated on the "why", but rather a Job who was humbled enough to admit that he doesn't have the answers, and won't be able to figure it all out, and that's okay.

So what gives? Are we simply supposed to be "resigned" to our struggles, resigned to our disappointments, resigned to injustices, resigned to grief? That's where the Gospel comes in - for we see quite clearly, Jesus (the model for each of us) not ignoring the suffering in front of him, but doing something about it, doing what he can to alleviate the pain and brokenness and sorrow of others, reaching out in love to people in need.

And so again, will we add to the burdens of others, or help ease them? Will we build up rather than tear down? Will we heal rather than harm? Will we love rather than hate? Will we contribute to making the world a little kinder, a little more compassionate, a little more bearable?

Job shows us that we will never really understand how or why our lives unfold as they do, never really comprehend our difficulties, struggles, let alone our sorrows. Yet, just because God is "in charge" doesn't give us permission to do nothing. In fact, the opposite is true. Where we see pain, where we see suffering, we have a choice. What choice will we make?

A Short Story

This real story is said of the German concentration camp during the Second World War. In the camp were a group of rabbis and learned Jews along with persons who had been in high standing prior to their arrest.

They had to work for six and half days every week but on Sunday afternoons they were left in relative peace. One such afternoon some of the learned Jews in their despair decided to put God on trial. The rabbis acted as judges and witnesses came forward for defense and for the prosecution.

The case for the prosecution was overwhelming. They had only to look around them: they were being wiped out as a race; many of their families had already died in the gas chambers. They were unable to look for their dear ones. How could a good God allow this to happen? The judges, despite a stout defense had no difficulty in reaching the verdict. God was guilty as charged, guilty of abandoning his chosen people. Silence fell upon the court. Then an elderly Jew got up to his feet and said: "Nevertheless, let us not forget...it is time for our Evening Prayers."