

Gesima 2 (Sexagesuna)

Morning Prayer A

First Lesson Isa 50:4-10

Second Lesson 2 Cor 12:1-12

Homily

"I knew a man," said St. Paul,
and went on with an amazing story
of a deeply mystical experience,
a man taken into the highest heaven,
either physically or in a vision,
and given supernatural knowledge of God.
"I knew a man," -- and that man,
according to most commentators,
was without question St. Paul himself.
He is very pointedly not bragging.
Such an experience did not
make him better than other men.
He made no use of it to establish his authority.
He brought it up
only to highlight something greater.

Yes, such things do happen.
Some of us -- many of us, actually --
have known those moments
where God seems nearer,

when He seems to speak to us individually.
Rational as we try to be in this very scientific age,
we, as Christians,
need to recognize the miraculous.
God is real.
He truly loves His creation.
He has not ceased being active in it.

But signs and wonders, visions and miracles,
though real,
are not the objective of our faith.
Our Lord Himself was scornful of those
who sought signs.

"Of such an one will I glory:" said the Apostle;
the gifts of God are wonderful
and should be celebrated,

"yet of myself I will not glory,"
He refused to take any credit for God's free gift.
He refused to admit that it said anything at all about
him,
as a person, as a leader, as an example

"but in mine infirmities. "
Wait a minute!
Was he boasting about his weakness?
Is that what people, especially leaders, do?

Does that make sense?

Well, yes, we have to accept that it does.

After all, this is Scripture, and is written for our learning.

So, then, what does this amazing and counterintuitive statement have to tell us?

What does it say about St. Paul?

What does it say about us?

What does it say about the Christian life?

"Know thyself," said a great Greek Philosopher.

It's rather easy for most of us to identify our strong points.

It's easy to insist that, because of my talents, I should have thus and so.

But it's rather harder for most of us to recognize our weaknesses, our deficiencies, those traits

which get in the way of doing what we should.

Saul of Tarsus was a proud young man, well educated, fervent in his piety, faithful in keeping the Law, but incapable of being what God called him to be.

It was not until he met the Lord, and in that awesome presence

came to realize his sin and his insufficiency that he began the work he was intended for.

He laid aside his Hebrew name, after a great king, and became known by his Greek name, Paul, Paulos, meaning 'the little one' From that day he spoke freely of his sin, of his weakness, and, only when he absolutely had to did he speak of his gifts and authority.

In our lesson, he speaks of the mysterious 'thorn in the flesh'. Scholars have been arguing for centuries over what that might be, a physical affliction, perhaps in the eyes, perhaps in the stomach, a form of temptation, an annoying person, whatever. All these have been claimed, but it's not important to know. He asked that it be taken away, and his request was not granted. He kept his weakness, whatever it was, and gloried in it. Not because it was a good thing, but because it pointed elsewhere.

"My grace is sufficient for thee: "

was God's answer

"for my strength is made perfect in weakness."

When man's strength and goodness are not evident,

then the goodness and glory of God can be revealed.

And thus St. Paul could say of himself:

*Most gladly therefore
will I rather glory in my infirmities,
that the power of Christ may rest upon me.
Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities,
in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions,
in distresses for Christ's sake:
for when I am weak, then am I strong.*

We are coming closer to Lent.

It's a time for meditating upon our sins.

Not to bash ourselves with guilt,

but to uncover them realistically in God's presence,

to allow Him, by the blood of the Cross,

to wash them in His forgiveness,

in His mercy, in His grace,

and to present ourselves, flawed as we are,

to be used in His service,

to be lifted up into His everlasting Kingdom.

Let us pray in the words of today's collect:

O Lord God, who seest that we put not our trust in
any thing that we do; mercifully grant that by thy
power we may be defended from all adversity;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Gesima 2 (Sexagesuna)

Morning Prayer B

First Lesson Isa 30:8-21

Second Lesson Mark 4:26-34

Homily

*But without a parable spake he not unto them:
and when they were alone,
he expounded all things to his disciples.*

Jesus' parables have often been thought of
as clever illustrations
to help people understand his message more easily.
That is how we use stories and examples
in preaching, in teaching, and in public speaking.
But that is not why He used stories.
His stories held a message that was not obvious.
When he spoke publicly he caused people
to begin thinking,
but only his disciples --
those who really wanted to hear His truth --
received the fullness of what He was saying.
His parables, and indeed the rest of Scripture,
are not intended to be
a clear and systematic presentation
of a step-by-step outline

of what we should think and do.
The Scripture requires explanation.
Its truth has been entrusted to a Church
in which He has placed scholars and teachers,
and it is in the centuries of the growth
of this Church
that a reliable understanding of His teaching and life
may be found.

That's what this strange little story of the mustard
tree is all about.

Jesus emerged from seeming obscurity,
preached in a small country,
managed to attract a moderate following,
and died.

At His death only John, his mother,
and a couple of other women remained.

What was left of his band of disciples
was cowering in a locked room.

Could a seed have been much smaller than that?
From beginnings like that, by the power of God,
that little church grew, and spread,
and made its presence known
in every corner of the world,
and has become a major power
in the affairs of men.

But back up a bit.

There's another story in today's Gospel reading.

A seed is planted and grows, and

*"when the fruit is brought forth,
immediately he putteth in the sickle,
because the harvest is come."*

We talk as though it is an easy and pleasant thing
to gather in the harvest,
but is that the way it is?

A sickle is rather sharp, isn't it?

It cuts. It takes the grain away from comfort
and brings it to a place where it is threshed.

That means -- beaten --
so that the inedible parts can be removed.

Harvest time is a time of joy,

The grain that is now ready is the whole purpose of
farming.

But harvest time is also disruptive,
sometimes painful.

Look again at the mustard tree.

Its branches shelter the birds of the air.

Do those birds all belong?

Is a farmer happy about the presence of crows?

You know, the church
certainly has gathered up a lot of power,
a lot of influence, a lot of prestige,
and its branches
often shelter those of less-than-pure motives.

Much evil has been done in the name of truth,
and much continues to be done.

In our Old Testament reading,

Isaiah speaks as though it is harvest time,
as though the reaping is about to happen,
the grain about to be collected and purified,
and what is not edible about to be discarded.
That is always an appropriate thought.

In one way or another

harvesting and purifying are always going on,
and this is an especially appropriate thought
as we draw closer to Lent.

Isaiah's word to the people of his day,
and to God's people of every day,
is both simple and chilling:

*"...this is a rebellious people, lying children,
children that will not hear the law of the LORD: "*

Even the greatest of saints have confessed
themselves to be sinners,
to be slow to hear the voice of God,
and even slower to obey.

It is so easy to trust in the fact that we have truth on
our side

(and we do)

and thus to rely upon the promises of God
as if they were automatically ours.

It is so very easy to become offended
 when our faults are exposed and condemned,
 when we are challenged with the need
 for major change
 in our own attitudes and actions,
 and it is easy to become angry with the messenger.
 to *"say to the seers, See not;
 and to the prophets,
 Prophecy not unto us right things,
 speak unto us smooth things, prophecy deceits:*
 but we are sinners, all of us,
 and we need correction, all of us,
 and when we have heard God rightly,
 as Isaiah said,
*"...though the Lord give you the bread of adversity,
 and the water of affliction,
 yet shall not thy teachers be removed into a corner
 any more,
 but thine eyes shall see thy teachers:
 And thine ears shall hear a word behind thee,
 saying,
 This is the way, walk ye in it..."*

Let us pray.

Lord, grant us the ears to hear,
 and the will to obey,
 that, led by thy Word, and filled with thy Spirit,

we may walk in thy Truth,
 to the honor and glory of thy Name,
 through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Gesima 2 (Sexagesuna)

Evening Prayer A

First Lesson Eccles 11:1-6

Second Lesson John 4:31-38

Homily

Jesus famously said,
 "Take no thought for the morrow."
 St. James advised us not to say
 "Tomorrow I will do thus and so,"
 but rather to say, "God willing, I will ..."
 You may have heard people assert that
 therefore it is wrong to plan ahead,
 that we should passively wait for whatever happens.
 Is that what God really expects of us?
 Didn't Jesus also talk a lot about being practical?
 Didn't He say things like,
 "No one goes to war unless he counts the cost?"
 He had a great deal to say about planning,
 making preparations,
 doing everything we know how to do.
 St. Paul, St. James, St. Peter, and St. John,
 all of them,
 gave a lot of practical advice
 in their letters to the Church,
 and expected both thought and effort to be applied.

We offer ourselves, our souls and bodies,
 to be used in His service.
 Christianity is hard work.
 Hebrews speaks of it as running a race.
 The Fathers of the Church wrote often of "spiritual
 athletes"
 And yet . . .

All that effort, all that planning,
 provides its own temptation.
 These are thoughts we need to be thinking
 as we draw near to the Great Fast of Lent.

If we take Lent seriously,
 if we take fasting seriously,
 if we put effort into deepening our life of prayer,
 it gets terribly easy to take credit
 for our own "progress",
 to believe that we are making ourselves better
 in God's sight,
 and perhaps that fellow Christians
 ought to give us credit for that.
 That's wrong.
 In our Old Testament reading, the author
 (whether Solomon or someone else)
 makes it very clear that all our planning
 is ultimately not enough.
 We believe in being practical, in saving up,

in investing wisely,
in making all the best preparations.

Well, yes!

All that is good and proper, even necessary, but . .

*"Cast thy bread upon the waters:" he writes,
"for thou shalt find it after many days."*

Don't hang on to it all
Let some of it loose, even if it looks foolish.
Give God a chance to do something surprising.

*"Give a portion to seven, and also to eight;
for thou knowest not what evil shall be upon the
earth. "*

Be really free about giving.
You don't know what is going to happen.
You don't know what surprises will come on you,
or on the one to whom you give.

*"If the clouds be full of rain,
they empty themselves upon the earth:
and if the tree fall toward the south,
or toward the north,
in the place where the tree falleth,
there it shall be."*

What happens, happens,
and you have little control over most of it.

*He that observeth the wind shall not sow;
and he that regardeth the clouds shall not reap.*

Sometimes waiting for the right moment means you
don't do what had to be done.

*"As thou knowest not what is the way of the spirit,
nor how the bones do grow
in the womb of her that is with child:
even so thou knowest not the works of God
who maketh all."*

Do we know what God has planned?
Are we able to predict His actions in advance?
Will our own planning ever be sufficient?

*"In the morning sow thy seed,
and in the evening withhold not thine hand: "*

By all means, do.
If a farmer doesn't plant, nothing grows.
If he ignores the harvest, the grain rots in the field.

*"for thou knowest not whether shall prosper,
either this or that,*

or whether they both shall be alike good."

But, when we've done it all, we need to trust,
because we just can't know.

Jesus' disciples said, "*Master, eat.*"
But he said unto them,
I have meat to eat that ye know not of.
...My meat is to do the will of him that sent me".

There is nothing on this earth
that we can rely upon.
Nothing we have is really ours.
None of our planning is trustworthy.
But God is faithful.
We pray "Thy will be done"
It will. But will we be in accord with it?
He expects us to work,
but this is the way he says it is:

"I sent you to reap
that whereon ye bestowed no labour:
other men laboured,
and ye are entered into their labours."

Lent is coming.
Let's make it a good preparation.
May He lead us by the power of His Spirit.

O God, whose will governs all creation,
who hast promised to care for thy sheep,
and hast pledged to lead and guide us into all truth;
mercifully grant that we may hear thy voice,
and follow thy will,
both to the preparation of our own souls
and to the spreading of thy Word,
through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Gesima 2 (Sexagesuna)

Evening Prayer B

First Lesson: Dan 3:1-26

Second Lesson Matt 10:16-23, 40-42

Homily

*Then Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego,
came forth of the midst of the fire.*

And how did they get there in the first place?
What on earth did they do
to get themselves into such a pickle?
Didn't they have sense enough
to keep out of trouble?
Well, now, that is a long story,
longer than our Old Testament lesson.
These three young men,
along with Daniel, their mentor,
had knocked themselves out
in the service of the king.
They had probably worked harder to please him
than most of their fellow Hebrews would approve of.
After all, he was the foreign king
that had conquered the homeland,
and carried the people off into exile.
Nevertheless these young men worked for him.

They worked hard,
and turned out to be more valuable to him
than most native Babylonians.
They did everything possible to please him --
except for
what their God had specifically forbidden them.
They kept kosher.
They did not eat the king's food,
because their religion forbade them.
They also did not worship the countless gods
that the people and king worshiped.
They believed and worshiped one God
and one only.

Aside from that,
they were the king's very best servants.
Here's where we come in this morning.
The king's advisors talked him into
a foolish command.
He decreed the death penalty
for any that refused to worship
that huge statue he had made,
apparently not realizing
that he would lose his best servants that way.
They refused, as subtly and politely as possible,
but they would not, could not, do as he asked.
They were cast into the fiery furnace.
The king did as he believed he must,

but the king mourned.
 However, the story did not turn out as expected.
 The young men did not die.

*"... Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego,
 came forth of the midst of the fire."*

There's more to it, but we'll come back to that.

*"Behold, I send you forth
 as sheep in the midst of wolves:
 be ye therefore wise as serpents,
 and harmless as doves."*

That's what Jesus said to his disciples, and to us.
 Doesn't it sound as though
 he had those young men in mind?
 Those three, surely,
 and the faithful Jews who were persecuted and killed
 only decades before His time,
 under Antiochus Epiphanes,
 and also his own followers
 very soon after His passion and death,
 and the uncounted army of martyrs
 from then until now -- right now,
 in places like China and Indonesia
 and Egypt and Nigeria,
 and on and on and on. -- right now.

Jesus' words today are not comforting,
 certainly not in the sense of soothing.
 He promised, as he did so often,
 that His Way is like carrying a cross,
 that His people would be persecuted,
 by a world that is unwilling to obey the will of God,
 persecuted in every generation
 until the end of the age.
 We don't like to hear that,
 we have trouble accepting it here and now,
 because we've had it easy for a long while.
 We've considered this to be a Christian country,
 and so it is, in part -- a progressively smaller part,
 and we've been shielded
 as few Christians have been.
 But, even in a "Christian" country,
 faith is not cheap.
 The pressure to live like everyone else
 is always present,
 usually informal here,
 but sometimes more official.
 Yes, the Lord does watch out for His people,
 but the rewards we seek (or should seek)
 are not the rewards the world seeks.
 A Christian seeks God.
 Everything else takes second place.

From Hymn 551:

*"Let goods and kindred go,
This mortal life also;
The body they may kill:
God's truth abideth still,
His kingdom is forever."*

And so it was that
when Nebuchanezzar looked into the furnace,
he said:

*"Did not we cast three men bound
into the midst of the fire? ...
Lo, I see four men loose,
walking in the midst of the fire,
and they have no hurt;
and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God. "*

We are called to unswerving obedience to our God.
He made no promise that it will be easy
-- quite the opposite, in fact --
But whatever pains come upon us,
whatever opposition, whatever disappointment,
He walks with us,
and eternal victory is sure.

Let us pray:

Direct us, O Lord, in all our doings, with thy most gracious favour, and further us with thy continual help; that in all our works begun, continued, and ended in thee, we may glorify thy holy Name, and finally, by thy mercy, obtain everlasting life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.