

12th Sunday in Ordinary Time – B

As promised, this week is the first week in a series of homilies in which I will try to explain a little about the Mass. However, unfortunately for a couple reasons that are too tedious to go into now, there will be a couple interruptions during this series, already next weekend. So, hopefully it won't be too confusing. I intend to post these homilies online as well.

Another point I'd like to make is that I won't be able to cover all there is to say about the Mass or answer every question. The Mass is too great and too rich for that. I took a semester-long course on it in seminary; numerous documents have been written about it. But if these homilies produce more questions in you about the Mass, I think that might be a good thing, and I would encourage you to keep learning more about it. Indeed, as with all mysteries of our faith, we can spend a lifetime going deeper and deeper into it without exhausting its riches.

But I also don't want to neglect our readings each week. And this week I think there is a very clear connection between our first reading and our Gospel which of course is intentional. Our first reading is from the book of Job, who is a mythical figure, a righteous, innocent man who nevertheless experiences great suffering, essentially losing everything. However, in spite of all this, he refuses to turn away from God. Some "friends" of his come to visit him, and a significant part of the book is their conversation with him, in which they basically insist that the troubles he is experiencing are because he must have done some wrong in his life. But Job insists on his innocence, and he does question God: Why did you let all this happen to me? This raises one of humanity's deepest questions: why do bad things happen to good people? Or, why do the wicked sometimes prosper, and the innocent sometimes suffer? How can we say that God is just if that is the case?

We hear some of the Lord's response to Job in our first reading. And basically it is this: for you to understand this, you would have to understand all things, and that means you would essentially have to be someone you are not: you would have to be like me and not the human being that you are. God sees the whole picture, and we see just a small piece. Although to us, we might think that the small piece we see is everything. But we have to remind ourselves, again and again, that we are mere human beings with limited minds, not to mention minds that have been negatively affected by sin, which can limit or prevent us from attaining true wisdom.

And as part of His response to Job, God tells him that He, God, is the creator and the master of everything, including of seas and storms. The Israelites were not a sea-faring people, even though their land bordered the Mediterranean. They thought the sea was a mysterious and a fearsome place. But God, being the Lord of all things, was likewise the Lord of the seas and the storms.

And in our Gospel reading, we hear how Jesus, who has gone out on a fishing boat on the Sea of Galilee with Peter and some other disciples, is asleep when a big storm comes up. After they awaken him, however, with just a word he is able to calm the wind and the waves. This demonstrates that He is the Lord: the God of Job, the one who can control all of nature at his command.

Sometimes in life when we experience great suffering, it can seem like the Lord is asleep. We might call out to Him, and yet receive no reply. Why is this happening to me Lord? Why won't you intervene and take this away?

We have to go back to the Lord's reply to Job in our first reading: in this life, we only see a small piece of reality. In our second reading from St. Paul's letter to the Corinthians, he says that if we are in Christ, we are a new creation: "Behold, the old things have passed; the new things have begun." They have begun but are not yet brought to fulfillment. Our Catholic faith, which we are

living out now, in this life, is primarily oriented to the future – the next life. Paul wrote this letter to the Corinthians during a time of great personal suffering, when he was experiencing much persecution for doing God’s will and spreading the Gospel message. He might have asked why he was suffering so much when he was just trying to do God’s will. But Paul was a man of hope, as we should be: if we are in Christ, we are a new creation; this world with its suffering and sadness is passing away, and will be replaced by a new and perfect world.

One thing that is absolutely essential for everyone to understand is that God is absolutely sovereign; He is not a like us only a super-being: He is absolutely OTHER. One of the great mysteries of our faith is that God became man. And Jesus, God made man, gave us the Mass as the highest form of prayer of the Church. So the Mass is above all else an act of *worship* of the one, true God. In the Mass, we encounter God in a way unlike any other

in this life, and God becomes present to us. As I mentioned last week, there are multiple modes of God's presence in the Mass: one being that He is present in our midst when two or more of us gather together in prayer as we do now. Likewise, He is present in Scripture which we read at every Mass. He is present in the minister, in the priest who celebrates the Mass, who in a sense "stands in" for Christ. And the Lord is most fully present in the Eucharist – Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity.

So the Mass is the connection – the ultimate connection in this life – to our Sovereign Lord and to the next life. The Eucharist indeed is a participation in the heavenly banquet already taking place in heaven, although for us here on earth, our eyes and our minds are veiled and we cannot see things as they completely are. So the Mass is ecclesiological – that is, it is the public prayer of the whole Church, not a private prayer. It is also eschatological – that is, it is a participation in, and a movement toward, heaven. And the

Mass is not intended to be like any other gathering of people. Furthermore, our Mass is rooted in the ancient Jewish liturgies, as we will hear about in coming weeks. And everything about the Mass has a meaning; it is not arbitrary – there is a reason behind everything. The Mass is not supposed to look just like regular life. So we normally celebrate Mass in churches with sacred art and architecture; the celebrant wears vestments and not street clothes; we don't use regular plates and bowls and cups but rather sacred vessels made out of precious materials, because they hold not regular bread and wine but the Body and Blood of Christ.

And we could just walk in and begin, but instead we begin with a procession: at the Sunday Mass, the procession begins at the door to the church and proceeds into the sanctuary. A procession is more formal than just walking in and going to our places.

Processions are used for more formal events; think of military parades, things like graduation ceremonies, and so on. I should

note that the various parts of the Mass have a functional side to them, but which also have taken on symbolic meaning. So for example, the entrance procession has a functional nature: getting one place to another. But it is done in the form of a procession, with an order, which symbolizes that we are a pilgrim people on a journey through life. This life is not our destination; rather, our destination is the next life. The Cross leads the entrance procession because it is the symbol of our triumph over sin and death. The Cross is followed by altar servers carrying candles which symbolize that Jesus is the Light of the World. Sometimes this is followed by someone carrying the Book of the Gospels, which represents Christ who is the Word of God and who is present in the Scriptures. And finally, the last in the procession is the minister of the Mass, the priest, who likewise represents Christ.

When we reach the sanctuary, we can either bow to the altar, or genuflect to the tabernacle. A genuflection is considered a greater

sign of respect than a bow. We bow to the altar because it represents Christ and because it is the place where Jesus' Body and Blood will be offered to the Father in heaven. But we genuflect to the tabernacle because Jesus is truly present there – not as a symbol, but truly Jesus himself, Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity.

I should also mention that the area around the altar is properly called the sanctuary. It is often referred to as the altar, but the altar is only the table in the sanctuary where the Eucharistic sacrifice takes place. The sanctuary is supposed to be distinct from the rest of the church because it is an even more sacred space. So it is often elevated, as it is in our church. In the ancient Jewish temple in Jerusalem, now long gone, there were different areas which represented different degrees of sacredness. The sanctuary of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem was the space that led to the tabernacle, which was itself a veiled off area that contained the Ark of the Covenant, which itself contained the tablets with the Ten

Commandments. Only the High Priest could enter the tabernacle – it was the most sacred place in Judaism, believed to be the intersection between heaven and earth. The sanctuary itself contained a menorah or a lamp stand with seven oil lamps which were always to be kept burning. It also contained a table upon which was placed “show bread” which represented the manna with which the Lord had fed the Israelites in the desert. And it also contained an altar where sacrifice were offered. Does all this sound familiar?

So the sanctuary should be regarded as a very sacred place. Only those who have a role in the Mass should enter it, and only when they are exercising their role in the Mass, either preparing for Mass, during the Mass, or afterwards.

After the priest and the other ministers and the altar servers enter the sanctuary, the priest reverences the altar, the table of the sacrifice, with a kiss. And then going to his chair he begins the Mass

with the sign of the cross, which is how Catholics normally begin and end every prayer. The Sign of the Cross is both a reminder of our baptism – for we are baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. And it is also a reminder that we are redeemed through Jesus’s death on the Cross.

Again, the Mass is first and foremost an act of worship of the Lord, of God who created us and gave us everything we have. It is an act of worship of God who sent his divine Son Jesus Christ to become man, to save us from our sins, and to sanctify us so that we might one day be united with Him in heaven.

- **June 23, 2024 at St. Mary’s, Spring Lake**