

FEBRUARY 4, 2018

Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Reading 1 JB 7:1-4, 6-7

Responsorial Psalm PS 147:1-2, 3-4, 5-6

R. (cf. 3a) **Praise the Lord, who heals the brokenhearted.**

Reading 2 1 COR 9:16-19, 22-23

Brothers and sisters: If I preach the gospel, this is no reason for me to boast, for an obligation has been imposed on me, and woe to me if I do not preach it! If I do so willingly, I have a recompense, but if unwillingly, then I have been entrusted with a stewardship. What then is my recompense? That, when I preach, I offer the gospel free of charge so as not to make full use of my right in the gospel. Although I am free in regard to all, I have made myself a slave to all so as to win over as many as possible. To the weak I became weak, to win over the weak. I have become all things to all, to save at least some. All this I do for the sake of the gospel, so that I too may have a share in it.

Gospel MK 1:29-39

HOMILY:

When I was a small boy, don't really remember the words of any homily delivered by a priest at Mass—though I do remember “going.” I really don't remember any specific teaching I learned in CCD class, what we now call “religious education.” But . . . what I do remember the actions of the great evangelist of my early life (and later life too!), my mother. I remember her having us kneel down by our beds to pray to a God who she taught us then was with us, cared for us, and would help for us. And I remember Mom, sometimes under great duress, loading us kids in the car and taking us to Mass, teaching us that going to pray was more important than playing on a “day off,” that God was due his weekly praise and thanksgiving, and that life was about more than what we did or wanted. My mother loved us so much that she was going to show us and tell us about the Lord, whether we loved her for it at the time or not! By her persistence in faith and love, even to the last hours of her life, when she with faith received the Sacrament of the Anointing on her death bed, my mother shared the good news of the gospel. She was an evangelist!

Week after week, we pray about our parish mission, that we might be “an evangelizing community *by faith, with love, in hope.*” As a reminder, after a process of prayerful consideration, our parish's pastoral council and your pastor identified this as our parish mission. However, it is not correct to say that we “came up with it.” For, over the last 40 years, our popes have been pressing us to remember that the very essence, the very purpose of the Body of Christ, the Church, is to share the good news of the gospel. It's why missionaries go to the ends of the earth; why we dedicate such a large percentage of our parish resources to education; and why our church has founded Catholic schools, colleges, universities, and seminaries. Sharing the message of Jesus—evangelization—it is our *Raison d'Être*—our reason for being. But . . . what is this gospel, this message of Jesus, that we are to proclaim? And, how are we to go about this? There is no better scriptural place to go than the extraordinary passage given to us in today's second reading, from the beautiful First Letter of St. Paul to the Corinthians, the 9th chapter.

There, St. Paul speaks in very personal terms about his life of being an evangelizer: “If I preach the gospel, this is no reason for me to boast, for an obligation has been imposed on me, and woe to me if I do not preach it!”

If we turn on the nightly news and see blazoned across the screen “BREAKING NEWS!”, this tends to get our attention—the words are usually associated with something vital and surprising (though, in its overuse, sometimes not!). When St. Paul said to his believers “the gospel,” they too would have associated this word with something quite specific. For where the Corinthians lived, Corinth, was firmly in the grasp of the Roman empire, who too had its teams of “evangelists,” not spreading the Christian message, but another message seen to be “good news,” that of a military victory. After such victories, Roman generals would send their ancient “public relations” folks out across the Empire, whom they called “evangelists,” with the *euangellion*, the good news, of a victory over some enemy. St. Paul the “evangelist” too has a message of victory, Christ’s victory over sin and death. And because it was the greatest of *euangellion*, the greatest good news, he too had to pan out across the Mediterranean world to tell the news.

And . . . how did St. Paul evangelize? He tells us: “I have made myself a slave to all so as to win over as many as possible.” Just like that word “*euangellion*,” so too the word “slave” would have had potent meaning to his listeners: for slaves were plentiful in Roman times—usually people defeated by the military might of Rome, they had no public rights and lived without any hope except to do the bidding of their masters. Paul has aspired to surrender all his rights—to dignity, prestige, wealth, career, status—in order that others might hear the good news he bears. And, because he now serves Jesus, he is filled with joy to be a slave to such a Master. Following St. Paul’s example, therefore, if we intend to be who we must be—evangelists of the gospel—we too must surrender our aspirations to prestige and status, except the status of humble servants of Jesus. If we are fearful about being messengers and representatives of Jesus’ message of freedom from sin and death, we’ve got some spiritual work to do!

Why become such a slave? St. Paul’s short answer is: love. He concludes this message about evangelization by saying, “All this I do for the sake of the gospel, so that I too may have a share in it. His trials, his being whipped in Pamos on the island of Cyprus, being stoned in Iconium in Asia Minor, and his ultimate decapitation in Rome, all are done that others might have a share in his extraordinary *euangellion*, his greatest of good news that, in Jesus’ death and resurrection, all humanity has the promise and hope of deliverance from sin, death, and the hope of eternal life. That’s pretty big breaking news!

If, then, we believe this message to be the biggest of Good News, as with St. Paul, we are obliged by the obligation of love to proclaim the gospel *by faith, with love, in hope*, whether convenient or not, whether the message is accepted or not. If we love others, we too are obliged to buck up our pride, risk our being rejected and speak the name of Jesus as the good news that each human heart longs to hear.

For God so loved the world, not just a few,
The wise and great, the lost and the true,
the favored, the weak of any-rank or hue.
God so loved the world. ***Do you?***

