

FROM THE PASTOR'S



Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time August 2, 2009 B

GRUMBLING IN THE DESERT

In our first reading today, we find the Israelites in a grumbling mood. They say to Moses and his brother Aaron: *“Would that we had died in the land of Egypt, as we sat by our fleshpots and ate our fill of bread. But you have led us out into this desert to make our whole community die of famine.”*

Spiritually speaking, the desert is a place of testing, trial and purification. It is for Jesus when he spends forty days out in it. In the desert, the Israelites are being called to place their trust in God that he will care for them. If he has protected them from the mighty power of the Pharaoh, he will surely protect them from starving in the desert. The desert is also a place of purification. In the desert, the Israelites are purified of their desires to return to a former way of life.

In today’s reading, the Lord, in response to the Israelites’ complaint, rains down manna from the heavens (a symbol of the Eucharist). *“I will now rain down bread from heaven for each of you.”* The author also has God saying: *“I have heard the grumbling of the Israelites.”* It is nice to know that God sometimes hears our grumbings. Of course after a while, the Israelites will get fed up of the daily diet of manna. After all, who wants to eat pizza or corned beef and cabbage for ten years?

A call to trust

The bottom line is that the Israelites are called to place their *trust* in God to provide for them in a time of need.

That is also our challenge. When I had my little ordeal back in June and didn’t know what was ahead, I was called to place my trust in God. One Friday morning when I was feeling a bit scared, the first reading of the day (Feast of the Sacred Heart) was all about how God had cared for Israel since she was a child. It was full of tenderness. *“It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, who took them in my arms...and fostered her like one who raises an infant to his cheeks”* (Hosea 11). It was a reassuring word about God’s providence at work in our lives.

A tough challenge

Needless to say, learning to place our trust in God is not an easy thing. We grow in trust by trusting just as we grow in love by loving. As we all know, it is easy to trust when we get a good outcome to an ordeal. It is much more challenging to keep our faith in God when things are not going our way. That is when we could come to a breaking point and feel God has really let us down.

The challenge then is to keep believing that God does have our best interests in mind—again not easy when things are not going the way *we* want them to go. In such times, our *trust muscles* are being stretched. If we succeed in hanging in there, we will have grown immensely in perhaps *the* key challenge of the spiritual life, the challenge to trust and believe that God always works for the good for those who place their trust in him.

How come the wicked get off lightly?

I often wonder when I see good people suffer a lot. How come God so often seems to let the wicked or those who don’t care much about him, get off so lightly? This morning, Monday, June 22, I came upon Psalm 73 whose author asks the same question. He muses:

“How good God is to Israel, to those who are pure of heart. Yet my feet came close to stumbling, my steps had almost slipped for I was filled with envy of the proud when I saw how the wicked prosper.

“For them there are no pains; their bodies are sound and sleek. They have no share in men’s sorrows; they are not stricken like others.

“So they wear their pride like a necklace, they clothe themselves with violence. Their hearts overflow with malice, their minds seethe with plots.

“They scoff; they speak with malice; from on high they plan oppression. They have set their mouths in the heavens and their tongues dictate to the earth.

“So the people turn to follow them and drink in all their words. They say: ‘How can God know? Does the Most High take any notice?’ Look at them, such are the wicked, but untroubled, they grow in wealth.”

Then the psalmist wonders:

“How useless to keep my heart pure and wash my hands in innocence, when I was stricken all day long, suffered punishment day after day.

“Then I said: ‘If I should speak like that, I should abandon the faith of your people.’

“I strove to fathom this problem, too hard for my mind to understand, until I pierced the mysteries of God and understood what becomes of the wicked.

“How slippery the paths on which you set them; you make them slide to destruction. How suddenly they come to their ruin, wiped out, destroyed by terrors. Like a dream one wakes from, O Lord, when you wake you dismiss them as phantoms.”

I love the verses in that second to the last stanza:

I strove to fathom this problem, too hard for my mind to understand, until I pierced the mysteries of God and understood what becomes of the wicked.

So too, we, like the psalmist, try to understand God’s strange ways.

Then the psalmist adds these beautiful verses:

“And so when my heart grew embittered and when I was cut to the quick, I was stupid and did not understand, no better than a beast in your sight.

“Yet I was always in your presence; you were holding me by my right hand. You will guide me by your counsel and so you will lead me to glory.

“What else have I in heaven but you? Apart from you I want nothing on earth. My body and my heart faint for joy; God is my possession forever.

“All those who abandon you shall perish; you will destroy all those who are faithless. To be near God is my happiness. I have made the Lord God my refuge. I will tell of all your works at the gates of the city of Zion.”

Remember Job? He too has tried to probe and understand God’s strange ways in his life. Finally, he realizes that he cannot. In the end, he is called to trust and to believe that God has his best interests in mind. As we struggle with God’s mysterious ways, our challenge is to embrace the strange wisdom found in the following piece.

The Weaver

*My life is but a weaving
between my Lord and me.
I cannot choose the colors
He worketh steadily.
Oft times He weaveth sorrow,
and I in foolish pride
forget He sees the upper,
and I, the underside.
Not till the loom is silent
and the shuttles cease to fly,
shall God unroll the canvas
and explain the reason why.
The dark threads are as needful
in the Weaver’s skillful hand
as the threads of gold and silver
in the pattern He has planned...*

(Author Unknown)

Finally, one of the wonderful things about Psalm 73 quoted above is that it gives us a great insight into one of God’s faithful friends. Note his readiness to express openly his thoughts and feelings about God’s ways. A huge part of growing spiritually is developing the ability to be *honest* with God about what is really going on in our lives.

Have an honest week,

