

14th Sunday in Ordinary Time – B

A couple weeks ago, I began a homily series explaining the Mass. This week is part two. and so we move on to the priest's greeting of the people at the beginning of Mass. "The grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all," of course is what the priest says. There are a couple other options for the greeting: "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ," or simply, "The Lord be with you." Each of these three greetings and the people's response come from Scripture: the first two come from 2nd Corinthians and Romans respectively, and the short one – "The Lord be with you" – comes from the Book of Ruth. This one was a traditional greeting in ancient Israel. The response, "And with your spirit", is taken from a couple of St. Paul's epistle: Galatians and his second letter to Timothy. But why do we not say, "And also with you," as we used to? A couple reasons: 1) "And with your spirit," is a closer translation from the original Latin, "*Et cum spiritu tuo,*" but also, because the priest is speaking in the Person of Jesus Christ, and the Spirit that is referred to here is the Holy Spirit which the priest received at his ordination.

Then we move on to what is called the Penitential Rite. Again, there are a few options here: during the Easter season, we have the option of replacing the Penitential Rite with the sprinkling rite when the priest walks around the church and sprinkles – some might say flings – holy water at the congregation. This is a symbolic action that represents cleansing from sin. But normally we have the Penitential Rite, which has its origins in Jewish synagogue worship. It consists of a prayer in which we acknowledge that we are sinners

and ask God for His mercy. One of the prayers we say is called the Confiteor, which is Latin for “I confess”, the first two words of the prayer.

Why do we begin our liturgies asking for forgiveness for our sins? Repentance is a necessary element of our response to God’s grace. Throughout the Old Testament, the Lord sent prophets to Israel calling them to repent of their sins and turn back to Him. John the Baptist prepared the way of the Lord by calling people to repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And of course, Jesus Himself began His public ministry by calling people to acknowledge their sinfulness and their need for God’s mercy. His first words as recorded in the Gospel of Mark are: “The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel.”

It is necessary for us to begin our worship by acknowledging our unworthiness to come before the Lord: not just because He is God and we are His creatures, but also because we are all sinners. We’ve probably all sinned in some way, great or small, since the last time we were at Mass. We confess our need for God’s mercy not to beat ourselves up and just feel bad, but in a spirit of humility which opens ourselves up to God’s grace and His mercy. After all, if we came to the Lord stubbornly refusing to believe that we never do anything wrong, first of all we would be out of touch with reality, and secondly, we would be guilty of that most fundamental sin, the sin of pride. Pride is essentially saying that we, not God, are the measure of what is right and what is wrong. This is a spiritually dangerous place to be because it effectively closes us off from God’s grace and His mercy.

Which brings us to our readings today. Our first reading comes from the Prophet Ezekiel. The Lord speaks to Ezekiel and tells him that He is sending him to the Israelites, whom He calls “hard of face and obstinate of heart” – they are “rebels who have rebelled against me,” God tells him. Of course, God is sending Ezekiel not to condemn the Israelites but to call them back to repentance so that they might receive God’s forgiveness and return to right relationship with Him. But God in essence warns Ezekiel that the Israelites will not like what he has to say to them and will reject him.

And in our Gospel reading from Mark, Jesus returns to “his native place” – Nazareth, where he grew up and spent the first 30 years of his life before beginning his public ministry. By the time Jesus goes back to Nazareth, he has already begun preaching his message of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, healing the sick, casting out demons, and raising the dead. And the people of Nazareth – people who already know Jesus and who watched him grow up – are astonished at what they are hearing about him. And they are also astonished at what he teaches them in the synagogue when he returns one Sabbath. And perhaps this familiarity with who Jesus is – or who they think Jesus is – leads them to reject him; as the reading says, “They took offense at him.” They are lacking in faith, and their hearts are closed to Jesus and his teaching. “Who is *he* to tell us what to do or what to believe?” Because of their lack of faith and their hardness of heart, Jesus “*was not able* to perform any mighty deed there” – well, he was still able to cure a few sick people, that’s still pretty decent – but their lack of faith in essence *limited* what Jesus was able to do there.

This is why we begin our liturgies with a prayer to acknowledge our sinfulness before the Lord and to ask for His forgiveness. We should not imitate the example of the Israelites who rejected the prophet Ezekiel or the townspeople of Nazareth who rejected Jesus through their own pride and stubbornness and hardness of heart. When we acknowledge our sins at the beginning of Mass, we humble ourselves before the Lord, and we open our hearts to God's mercy and to His Word – the Word we hear shortly afterwards in our readings from Scripture.

If we fail to recognize our own need for repentance, we risk not being able to hear God's word in the Scriptures. One of the things that prevents us from hearing God's word is filtering everything through our own set of assumptions, our own preconceptions, through the lens of an ideology to which we subscribe. We might not hear the Truth – that which really is, what God wants to teach us – because we first filter it through our politics or a particular ideology. That is not to say that there is no truth to be found in certain political or ideological beliefs. Probably most have at least a kernel of truth to them. But no ideology or set of political beliefs should form the foundation or the framework for everything we believe because they are not the fullness of the Truth; there are often misrepresentations, exaggerations, and even outright falsehoods mixed in as well. One of the core teachings of our Catholic faith is that Jesus established His Church here on earth to serve as the repository of the Truth, to communicate the Truth to the world. So we ought to filter ideological and political beliefs through the truths of our faith and not the other way around.

I recognize that this can be difficult, not least of all because we are all human beings with limited minds, a limited range of experience, and so on. And not to mention the difficulty in believing that the Catholic Church, with all of its human flaws and shortcomings, can be the repository of truth. But we must remind ourselves that the Church has not just a human dimension, but also a divine dimension. It is a mystery why the Lord would entrust the treasures of our faith to be held in the earthen vessels of imperfect, sinful humanity. So it takes humility – the opposite of pride – to acknowledge that there are mysteries greater than us, and that we are in need of God’s grace that He will enlighten our minds. This too is what the penitential rite is for.

The priest concludes the penitential rite with a sort of absolution: “May Almighty God have mercy on us, forgive us our sins, and bring us to everlasting life.” He is not giving actual absolution in this moment as in the sacrament of reconciliation; rather, he is praying a prayer of petition to God for forgiveness for both himself and the whole congregation. Once we have expressed our need for God’s forgiveness, we are spiritually disposed to enter into the worship of the Mass, which continues with the Gloria, an ancient prayer of praise and glory to God.

So as we continue with this liturgy of worship of our Almighty God, let us ask Him to dispose our hearts to Him – to open our hearts to His grace, His mercy, and His Truth.

- **July 7, 2024 at St. Mary’s, Spring Lake**