

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time – B

Last Sunday I said that I was going to wrap up the series on explaining the Mass, but I realized that I haven't quite finished it yet. Don't worry – there's not much left, since last week we left off with receiving communion. So after we've received communion, there should be some time for silent prayer and worship of the Lord Jesus who we have just received physically into our bodies under the appearance of bread and wine, and spiritually into our hearts. Then the priest says, "Let us pray," everyone rises, and then there should be a moment or two again of silence during which we can give thanks to the Lord once again for the gift of Himself in the Eucharist, or we can again bring our personal petitions to Him. Then the priest prays the Prayer after Communion, in which he asks God that, having received the Eucharist, we may now bear fruit for the Lord through how we live our lives.

The priest then gives a final blessing to the people gathered and then dismisses them by saying, “Go into peace,” “Go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life,” “Go and announce the Gospel of the Lord,” or, “Go forth, the Mass is ended.” And the people respond, “Thanks be to God” – as a kid I used to think that was like an expression of relief, as in, “thanks be to God, finally this is over and now I can go do something *fun*.” No: we are giving thanks to God a final time for the gift of Himself in the Mass, in the Word, in the Eucharist, and for being able to worship Him in the Mass.

So Mass ends pretty quickly after we have received communion. We are now sent back out into the world, back to regular life so to speak, back to a world that is so often indifferent to Christian beliefs and teachings. We are sent out to the world to live out our faith, to share God’s love with the world, to evangelize the world, to “make disciples of all the nations.” This of course presupposes that we have been open to this encounter with the Lord

we have just had at Mass. It may not seem like a dramatic encounter; it may have even seemed very ordinary, but we have nonetheless encountered the Lord in the Mass. We have come into His presence; we have worshipped Him; we have listened to His Word; we have received Him in communion. And this should change us in some way. Perhaps the change in us is subtle, but over time, if we are open to receive what God desires to give us, if we are faithful to Him, coming to Mass week in and week out, God will transform our hearts more and more, and in ways we can't imagine.

But the encounter we have just had with God and the changes He is bringing about in us are not just for our own sake. We are sent out into the world to evangelize the world, to transform it, by sharing God's love with others. Which brings us to our readings. If you recall, over the last five weeks our Gospel readings have been from the Bread of Life discourse in the Gospel of John. But this week we return to the Gospel of Mark, from which we've been

hearing throughout Ordinary Time this year. And in this Sunday's Gospel, Jesus talks about God's Law, and in a way that seems to contradict a little bit our first reading from the book of Deuteronomy. The context of our Gospel reading is a debate between Jesus and some Pharisees over the customs of the elders. A common misunderstanding is that Jesus is criticizing the Pharisees for scrupulously trying to follow God's Law. Rather, he is critical of them because they have "added to" God's law, as the Jewish people were instructed not to do back in the time of Moses, as we heard in our first reading: "In your observance of the commandments of the Lord, your God...you shall not add to what I command you nor subtract from it." The Pharisees had studied the Law which God had given to Moses very carefully and determined that fulfilling it properly involved all kinds of additional exercises like the washing of hands before every meal. These things, perhaps helpful in themselves – I know my parents always made sure I washed my hands before every meal, and I still do it – took on a highly

ritualistic nature, and external actions such as these then became the Pharisees' emphasis. In other words, Jesus was critical of the Pharisees because they taught that being faithful to the Lord and following His law consisted of purely external actions. They failed to see that truly following God's Law must entail a change of one's very heart.

So, Jesus teaches us here that following the Lord's commandments must involve an interior change – which then should transform our exterior actions. Jesus is not throwing out the commandments, or dismissing them, or downplaying them; rather, he elevates the Law by teaching that it must include an interior transformation of the whole human person. What is going on inside of us – within our hearts and our minds – is then reflected in how we live our lives and how we treat one another.

Intuitively, I think most people, if not everyone, recognizes that sin doesn't just come out of nowhere: people don't commit sin

for no reason: it has come from somewhere. The sins that Jesus lists in our Gospel reading are not purely external actions that people just do – they begin within us. Different saints and theologians have talked about, for lack of a better term, the stages of sin. For example, let's look at a very common sin: gossip. You're minding your business, but then you run into someone you know who seems to have it all: nice things, nice life, nice vacations, etc.. You exchange pleasantries like you're delighted to see each other. But then you walk away and start to ruminate. "Why does so-and-so seem to have such a perfect life? Why can't my life be perfect like that? That person doesn't even deserve it – he (or she) is rude, obnoxious, and so on." So far, so bad. But maybe it wouldn't go any further than this, but then you run into someone else you know. You mention who you just saw, and your friend's eyebrows arch just a hint. "You know" – your friend says – "I heard that so-and-so..", followed by a juicy tidbit of gossip that paints the person in an unflattering light. You know it's wrong, but at the same time you

delight in it because of your envy of the person. You join in, and perhaps you even embellish your own little story about that person's shortcomings and annoying character. The conversation ends, you walk away, feeling a little triumphant, but you also feel a little guilty. You know you didn't have to join in; you didn't have to add to the gossip. The triumphant feeling ends up getting completely erased by the guilt you now feel.

A few points from this story: one, as Jesus said, sin originates within our hearts. Two, it can easily escalate into something worse. Third, it degrades – the gossip can degrade not only the person being gossiped about, but it also degrades the people participating in it. This is just one example of sin; of course there are many, many others.

What Jesus calls us to is a transformation of our whole selves. He calls us to imitate him in his goodness and his perfection. That means not just performing exterior actions, especially for the

purpose of making ourselves look good in front of others. But nor does it mean not caring about our exterior actions and doing whatever we want. Again, Jesus calls us to a transformation of our whole person – beginning with our hearts and our minds – what goes on inside of us. And then this transformation should be reflected in our exterior actions, in how we live our lives, in how we treat one another.

Following Jesus isn't just about not committing sin and not doing bad things. It also means seeking to imitate Jesus, who is our perfect example, in practicing virtue, in treating others with kindness, charity, and mercy. This is also what the apostle James exhorts us to do in our second reading. Being a true disciple of Jesus means inviting him into our hearts every day, so that He can begin to do his work in us, so that He can transform us. Which is great news, because while we might be able to improve ourselves somewhat, especially our exterior actions like the Pharisees, we can't

bring about in ourselves the whole transformation of self to which Jesus calls us.

In our encounter with Jesus Christ in the Mass, in our worship of Him in the Mass, we can open our hearts that much more to Him. And then we ought to go out into the world to live out what Jesus calls to, and to share His love with a world so much in need of it.

- **September 1, 2024 at St. Mary's, Spring Lake**