

## 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday Lent B (Mark 1:12-15)

Our Gospel today contains a simple but powerful sentence. So casually is it stated that its significance could be easily overlooked. "After John had been arrested and jailed, Jesus came into Galilee preaching the Gospel." This may appear to be nothing more than a simple historical statement. Mark is dating the public ministry of Jesus, and he says it started in Galilee right after John the Baptist was imprisoned by Herod. Mark is not only telling us something about history, he is teaching us something about truth. He is reminding us that you can't put truth in jail. John the Baptist had been speaking the truth and King Herod was living a lie. The conflict between the two was making Herod extremely uncomfortable. So in an attempt to hide the truth about himself, Herod had John arrested, locked up in jail, and eventually executed. He succeeded in silencing John but the truth kept right on going.

Truth is often discomfoting because truth is personal. To be exposed to truth means that we must somehow relate to that truth. We may try to ignore it, or seek to deny it, or we can line up our lives with it. Truth calls for some kind of personal response. We learn that 2 plus 2 equals 4, and we can't spend time pretending that 2 plus 2 equals 5. To ignore this truth is an invitation to personal economic disaster and possible corporate collapse. Truth is personal, and we deal with it every time we balance our checkbook.

How much more is truth personal when we get into the higher realm of social, moral, and spiritual truth? For example, the value of our relating to other human beings as sister or brother, as people created in God's image and likeness as Genesis tells us. All the way from Cain asking, "Am I my brother's keeper?" to Jesus saying "Love your enemies." Scripture telling us of the essential oneness of the human race confronts us. Human solidarity as brothers and sisters affects our schools, our sports, our communities, our government, our churches, our jobs, our businesses, our industries, and our families, all are touched by truth.

The conflict between truth and deception continues radically in our world today. Just pick up the morning newspaper, or turn on the TV news channel. We see this conflict and denial of truth in the way we take care of those less fortunate than we are in our own country, the homeless, the children who live in poverty and hunger, the refugees and immigrants, the lack of medical care in the most prosperous country in the world. And the economy, we are told is just wonderful. We see the abuse of power by modern day Herods in different parts of the world who put people of truth in other jails, hoping that truth will be silenced in favor of economic development and selfish concerns.

And Jesus comes among us as the one who is the Way, the Truth, the Life, laying down his own life to tell us the very personal truth that we are intensely loved by the God who created us in his own image, male and female. He calls us to live out that truth in the way we love one another as he has loved us. And so we give thanks for the one who shares his life with us in this Eucharist.

Al Grosskopf, S.J.

## 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday Lent B (Mark 9:2-10)

Do you ever remember a moment when life finally became clear for you, when you knew what life is about? A fleeting moment but definitive; a reference point, a special moment when someone affirmed you in a time of doubt? When someone was there for you in a hard time? A graduation day, perhaps, and mom and dad and brothers and sisters affirmed you? Maybe a private moment- just you and God under the stars, or at the beach, or on a mountain? A moment of truth. A moment of being claimed by someone important to you. A moment of being loved by another? The transfiguration was like that for Jesus.

When Jesus began his ministry at the Jordan and was baptized by John, he heard these words: "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased. Listen to him." Here Jesus is being lovingly affirmed at Mt. Tabor once again by his Father. Moses and Elijah appeared and spoke of Jesus' passage and gave him their support. Jesus needed to hear these affirming words and their supportive presence. Peter, John, and James were overcome with awe and were probably afraid. How could they describe this profound experience?

Jesus came down from the mountain, in a sense, a changed man. He had accepted the ultimate failure of death. First death, then resurrection. He had experienced failure before. When his family thought he had lost his mind, he found new friends. When his hometown rejected him, and attempted to throw him over a cliff, he moved on to other towns. "He learned obedience through the things he suffered," as we read in the letter to the Hebrews. Jesus was and is very human.

How do we learn obedience when we face the hard facts of life, and we suffer from them? How do we handle failure as a basic ingredient of life? How do we handle death, the ultimate failure? This frightens us, so we try to make some things sacred and timeless, safe from the ravages of death. Things like love. We like to think that love goes on forever. And it should. But sometimes it doesn't, as some of my divorced friends tell me. Maybe not because it wasn't really love at all. Or maybe it just died.

We like to think that our children will comfort us in our old age, that they will carry on our name and promise. And they should. But maybe they don't. Maybe not through anyone's fault, but just because all of us are orphans and strangers born out of due time. Children like to think their parents are perfect. And they ought to be. But sometimes they aren't. Not because they don't want to be, but just because no one is. One of the great tragedies of life is when children first discover that their parents can fail them.

I dwell on these things, not to cast a grey spell over life. Just the opposite. I want to insist that life is good in itself- it needs no justification. We don't have to prove anything; merely to be alive is a great success. It's our refusal to accept failure that destroys life. No one can accept ultimate and total failure as their final condition. And we don't have to. That's something that's sacred and timeless, something that never fails. It's God. God takes all our failures in hand and makes them whole.

In the woundedness of Jesus we can bring to him our woundedness and ask him simply to remember. We, like Jesus, can learn obedience through our own failure and suffering, and know that we are not alone, for he has gone before us, the one who will never abandon us or walk away from us. "This is my beloved Son. Listen to him."

Al Grosskopf, S.J.

### **3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday Lent B (John 2:13-25)**

I think some people may have a hard time with our Gospel reading today. The difficulty may be trying to reconcile the Jesus who drove the moneychangers out of the temple with the Jesus who said, "Turn the other cheek," and "love your enemies." Admittedly it's hard to picture Jesus with a whip in his hand driving men before him, turning over their tables, and scattering their money on the floor. When we think of anger, we think of childish tantrums and broken things- toys, dishes, hearts, homes, friendships, and lives. We may think of road rage and spousal abuse and anger management programs. Few things have wrought more anguish in this world than childish anger, even on the international level, by supposedly adult people.

And yet our Gospel today brings us face to face with the truth that there is such a thing as healthy anger. There's no disputing the fact that when Jesus cleansed the temple, he was angry. Anger in itself is neither good nor bad, moral nor immoral. It is an emotion which draws its moral quality from the thing to which it is attached and the way in which it is expressed. It's possible to be thoroughly angry and thoroughly Christian at the same time. In fact there are times and circumstances in which it would be utterly inappropriate, even unchristian, not to be angry.

What's the difference between right anger and wrong anger? I submit that it is self-interest. The most evident thing about the anger of Jesus is that it was never motivated by self-interest. But he could and did get deeply angry at the mistreatment of other people. The thing he reacted to in our Gospel reading was a religious rip-off. The merchants in the temple were selling sacrificial birds and animals, but the purchases had to be made with temple money. So the people had to exchange their money for temple money. This was the exploitative business of the moneychangers. And the rate of exchange was almost always to the advantage of the moneychangers.

When people take unfair advantage of other people, it's time for Christians to get mad. This presupposes that we care about people. The emotional reaction of Jesus to the exploitation of people he loved and respected, to their abuse, was an appropriate anger. If someone were to mistreat a member of your family, perhaps a con artist cheating your aged parents out of their life savings, or a pusher getting your son or daughter hooked on drugs, your anger would know no bounds, because of your love for those persons. If we aren't angry about some of the injustices occurring in our world today, that says something about our lack of love for our brothers and sisters who are created in God's image, male and female, as we read in Genesis.

This healthy kind of anger, channeled into constructive paths, may help us change some of the injustices in our society such as corporate crime, rendering people homeless and hungry and hopeless. Or making people more aware of the injustices connected with the death penalty, or other politically correct injustices. And so we give thanks today for the sometimes politically incorrect presence of Jesus in our lives and in our world, the one who calls us to a new awareness of the value of human life and human dignity.

Al Grosskopf, S.J.

#### **4th Sunday Lent (Laetare) B (John 3:14-21)**

Have you ever asked yourself the question, "What would heaven be like?" How would I design my paradise? Would there be pearly gates leading to streets of gold? Would the delicate notes of harps fill the air? Would it be as boring as some people might imagine, just sitting around on our own private cloud and twiddling our thumbs?

A short time ago, I recall a survey of peoples' opinions. The question asked was "What would be paradise?" Some of the responses were most interesting. One young woman said it was "a rich husband. I'll have a nice car and I won't have to work. I'll just lie around doing nothing. I won't have kids and I'll spend money all day. I'll buy diamond rings and necklaces, a Jaguar and a Mercedes. That would be paradise." Another said, "Having an unlimited supply of See's candy and never gaining an ounce. I'd have chocolate nougat and dark nougat. If I got tired of that I'd throw in some dark walnuts and mint crispies and molasses chips. There wouldn't be any guilt. But I would probably get sick of it." The best response, I think was this one: "Being loved is paradise regardless of where you are or what you are doing. When you have that security you can endure anything. Whatever hardships you encounter, you can overcome. I can't imagine being unloved. Unselfishness and concern for others is heaven. That's what life is really about. It makes you feel like you have everything you need." I think she's right on target.

Have you ever seen on a TV broadcast of a football game a guy who holds up a sign that says: "John 3:16?" I often wonder how many people seeing his sign rush to a Bible to check it out. We may think he's a little weird, but that's the Gospel for today. "Yes, God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him may not die, but may have eternal life." This tells us that God is a lover of people, and is really tuned in to what our hearts desire. Our second reading from Ephesians tells us "even when we were dead in our transgressions, God brought us to life with Christ- by grace you have been saved." Admittedly, a God who loves all people is not an easy thought to think. The last I heard, there were something like 7 billion people in the world. We can't even comprehend that number, let alone love all the people that number represents. We do well to stretch our love around the few people that we know, our families, our friends. So it's very hard to think of God's love for all people. Yet our God is so intensely, passionately, in love with us that he can love each of us individually as well as everyone collectively.

Our task is to let ourselves be open to receiving God's utterly faithful love which can touch us in ways that give us value, in a world where we are sometimes devalued and put down by others. This is the message Jesus has for us, we who have been created in God's image, male and female, as Genesis tells us. True love is not hard to recognize. It's first impulse and its highest joy is to give. When a young man truly loves a young woman, you can always tell. He gives her respect. He gives her trust. When friends truly love each other, respect and trust are always a necessary part of their friendship. When parents truly love their children, they respect them and give them security. As we allow ourselves to be loved by our loving God, "who so loved the world that he sent his only son," we can become more free to share our love with each other practically, to listen to each other and to help each other in more trusting ways. And so, paradise is being loved, especially being loved by our utterly faithful God who will never abandon us, our life giving God who calls us to share his love with one another. Let us give thanks for such a God. Amen.

Al Grosskopf, S.J.

## 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday Lent B (John 12:20-33)

"I solemnly assure you, unless the grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat." Self-preservation we are told is the first law of nature. A deer or rabbit flees at the first sign of danger. Bugs on the floor scurry for cover when they feel threatened. You and I are governed by the same instinct. We look both ways before crossing the street. We lock our doors at night as a safety precaution. In some places emergency phones are scattered about. Since 9/11 a fear for security has gripped our country. Airport security reflects this whenever we travel by air. We see the doctor when sickness strikes, and we live in fear of various epidemics. The impulse to survive is a basic part of our human nature.

We read of stories where parents risk their lives to save a child who is drowning, or is trapped in a burning building, and they lose their lives in the process of saving their child. We grieve when courageous police lose their lives in their duty to protect us. It may be true that the law of self-preservation is the first law of nature, but there is another truth that sometimes cancels that law.

Jesus talked about this in today's Gospel. He spoke of finding life by losing it, of enlarging life by giving it away. "Unless the grain of wheat falls to the ground..." "But if it dies it produces much fruit." That's easy to see when one talks about wheat. Unless Jesus had given up his own life he would have ended up just the carpenter of Nazareth. At most, he might have been the teacher of Galilee. But by his death he became the savior of the world. As St. Paul said, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him. Obviously none of us can become that. But like the grain of wheat, we do have the capacity to become more than we are. The only question is, do we hold onto life or do we give it away?

Life is a gift which we have received. Our parents have each given parts of themselves to us. But more than that, God is the one who has given us life, and who made us in the divine image, male and female. That's our real life, the indefinable something that makes us who we are and what we are, the one who shares the life of God. The worst thing about selfish living is not that we cheat others, but that we cheat ourselves. The one who treats his or her life as their own personal possession, keeping the entire thing for his or her self will lose it. But the one who gives it away will have such an abundance of life that it will last for all eternity.

Keep all your friendliness to yourself, never share it with another human being, and you will eventually find yourself with no friends at all. But give your friendliness away, be generous with words of encouragement and your deeds of kindness, and the result will be astonishing. You will find yourself with more friends than you ever dreamed possible. The same is true of faith, hope, and love, of all things that make life worth living. If we keep them to ourselves, they eventually dwindle and die. But if we share them they multiply until only eternity can contain their abundance. Jesus knew of what he spoke. Life is not for keeping it. Life is for giving it away. "Unless the grain of wheat fall to the earth and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat." Jesus, the grain of wheat, has indeed fallen into the earth, and that wheat has sprouted and become for us the Bread of Life. Let us prepare to share that Eucharistic Bread. Let us give thanks.

Al Grosskopf, S.J.

## **Passion (Palm) Sunday B (Mark 14:1-15:47)**

Picture, if you will, a political candidate surrounded by adoring supporters, a cast of campaign workers, and a legion of press coverage. His every word is recorded. He's followed as he jogs, as he dines at a restaurant, when he emerges from a hotel. He must wave and smile. But if the truth were told he is desperately alone, alone in a crowd. Picture, if you will, a supermodel who graces the front of all the magazines. When she walks down the fashion runway, all cameras, all eyes are upon her. She appears on all the talk shows and party lists. She has learned to smile even when she feels sad. She can look beautiful even when she feels ill. But underneath the perfect makeup and the perfect body and the perfect smile she bears a secret. She feels afraid and alone, and despite the popularity, she feels alone in the crowd. Picture, if you will, a pastor serving a large parish. He is loved by the parishioners. They invite him to say a prayer at all the big events. Children wave to him when he passes. Hundreds listen to his words at Mass. Everywhere he goes someone wants a piece of his time, of his attention, of his blessing. But at night, in his heart of hearts, he feels alone, alone in a crowd.

Perhaps some of you have felt alone, alone in a crowd. No one really knows you or the person you really are. No one really understands you. If this may be true, and I suspect that's true of all of us, Jesus has been there too. Our Gospel today tells the story of the loneliness of Jesus in a crowd, a crowd which fails to understand him.

Jesus knew that the hosannas were hollow and the palms being strewn would wither and die. Their expectations for an earthly messiah would fail them in their futile expectations. He came not to free them from the hated Roman domination or to bring political liberation. He came to bring them life and hope in something much more enduring and much more liberating. His promise of new life and triumph over death continues to stir our hearts as we follow Jesus in his loneliness, the one who understands our loneliness, the one who touches us as the healer of our own low expectations. And we come together today to remember him as he asked us to do, and to be fed with his very presence as the bread of life.

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