

6th Sunday of Ordinary Time B – Church of Saint Ann
February 15, 2009 – R. Vincent Gartland, Pastor

SUNDAY WORSHIP: ESSENTIAL FOR HEALTH AND WHOLENESS

A traditional homily for this Gospel story of Jesus healing the leper goes something like this: There was a man who had leprosy and he cries out to Jesus to heal him. Jesus does so. Now, today, there are not many people with leprosy on the streets so it is better to see the man as a social outcast. We have a lot of social outcasts, people we just plain avoid all around us. Jesus reached out to these people and so should we.

There is nothing wrong with that interpretation. Certainly, we should be thoughtful and loving to those who society shuns. It is a very Christian thing to do. But today, I would like to suggest that we look at this story in a little different way; perhaps the way that a first century Jewish-Christian might see the story.

Leprosy was a terrible disease and there were a lot of lepers around in Jesus' time. Leprosy makes a person not only sick, but, according to the Jewish law, unclean. Lepers had to warn you they were coming and keep out of people's way. They were also cut off from worship. They could not go near the temple, for they were thought of as unclean.

When the man comes to Jesus and asks for his help, he was asking for more than a physical healing; he was asking to be restored to the temple worship.

That is the story in many of Jesus miracles.

Remember the woman with the hemorrhage. She had spent years going to doctors, and no one was able to do anything. Because she was hemorrhaging, she was unclean and not permitted to worship; the same with the man with the withered hand. Any kind of physical deformity made a person unclean and not fit to worship. Remember the lady who was bent over. She was not able to stand up straight, which is the position of worship; she, too, was considered unclean. Jesus heals them all and not only restores their physical health, but he restores them to the community - to right worship.

When Jesus heals the leper in today's Gospel, where does he send him? Directly to the temple where he had not been allowed to go, and Jesus tells him to show himself to the priests. The book of Leviticus that we heard from in the first reading, lays out many different rituals for a priest to determine if one is clean or unclean. They would declare who was fit for worship. They are the ones who determine who has the right to public worship.

So there is more to the story than just the physical healing. The man is also restored to the community worship. Community worship is an essential part of life.

The story gives us an opportunity to reflect upon the centrality and necessity of worship for our health and well being. That is really what the Fathers of Vatican Council II had in mind when they called for a reform of the liturgy. They called the liturgy the summit and source of our life. They

realized how important worship was to our lives. There was a sense that we had become passive during worship and the Fathers of the Council wanted to revive our active participation in liturgical worship.

What seemed to have happen in the wake of the Vatican Council was exactly the opposite. In the past fifty years, we have seen a mass exodus from the Mass. Statistics tell us that today only 25% of American Catholics and 10 % of European Catholics attend worship regularly. Here at Saint Ann's we are slightly higher at 30 %, but that still is not good. This certainly is a sad commentary on the state of the church and the world after the council. We could give all kinds of reasons for this decrease in Mass attendance: sociological, cultural, a greater sense of freedom, lack of a fear of hell or God.

Whatever the reason, it might be good for us to look at the importance of worship and why it was so important to Jesus that it played so strongly in many of his miracles. He seemed to be constantly restoring people to health and to community worship.

First, we need to admit that God does not need our praise. God has all God needs. Our worship adds nothing to God. So what does it do? Why is it prescribed by law? Why are Catholics expected to participate in worship each week? Because it does something very important to us and to the community. Worship helps us to know who we are – people of worth and dignity, sons and daughters of God, heirs with one another to God's kingdom. It helps us to set priorities in our life. Just by coming to Mass, even when we are not conscious of it, says that God is 1st in my life. Our common worship brings us together and helps us to support one another. It gives power and purpose to our lives.

Let's go back to Jesus, the Messiah. We spoke about Jesus fulfilling the Messianic role a number of Sundays ago. What is the role of the Messiah? He is to bring together all the tribes of Israel in worship of the one true God. He is to unite Israel, and once God's people are united, their worship will act as a magnet to pull the whole world toward worship of the one true God, toward this New Jerusalem. Not by force or coercion, but by the power of example and love. This is the dream of God. This is how the Messiah figures in the establishment of God's kingdom. He is to gather all in worship of the one true God, and that worship will pull all others to the one true God.

That is why we, people who follow Jesus, are called to worship weekly. Our participating in worship should be a beacon to others. It should help to order the world. We don't have to look too far to see that the world is in need of ordering. For the past few months, we have seen how the economic condition of the world has become severally disordered through greed. Greed is simply another form of false worship. Instead of worshipping the one true God, people are brought to worship money; they accumulate more than they could possible use. It is interesting that in the past few months we have seen that those who have worshiped the god of money have certainly pulled us all into their worship of this false god. And today, we are seeing exactly how false god money is.

The violence that plagues our cities is a powerful indictor of people who have begun to worship false gods, whose lives have twisted and turned and are severely out of order. Friday evening

we saw the senseless killing of another Philadelphia police officer. A very clear sign of a city in great disorder, worshipping it seems the god of drugs. You can be sure that the man who killed Officer Palanski was not at Sunday worship last week. I could go on, but it is clear we need to get our world, our cities, and our own lives back in order. We need to get back to worship of the one true God. That is what Sunday Mass is all about. It helps us to order our lives.

Oh, I have heard the cry, “The Mass is boring” (not in this parish of course), or “I don’t get anything out of the Mass”, or “It is just too tedious,” or “I have too many other things to do” (to many other gods to worship – work, sports, shopping, cleaning, friends, sleep.)

Who ever said the purpose of worship was to entertain? The purpose of worship is to order our lives, and through that process, order our society; to restore proper order to the world, and, as we do that to move us all closer to the kingdom of God. That’s why we are here. Not to feel good or to get something out of this Mass, but to get our life in order; to set our priorities straight.

If we put God first in our lives, all other things will fall into place - our economy, our health, our relationships, our families. Maybe not right away, not tomorrow or the next day, but eventually with a tremendous amount of effort; and the power of that order will act as a magnet to pull all toward this proper worship of the one true God. God’s kingdom will come “in our time.”

If we want to get our society in order, we need to get ourselves in order; and if we want to get ourselves in order, we need to start by ordering our lives properly, putting God first. That’s what you do when you come to worship. You make a clear statement that in your life God is first. And once God is first everything else will fall into place.

Here is a good example of how it works. I remember during high school my best year was my junior year. I was, for the most part, simply an average student. But junior year, I shined. I even surprised myself. I never even planned to get straight A’s. They just happened. What happened in my junior year? I got a job at the Parkside Theater working as an usher, two nights a week and weekend, and the job forced me to put many other things in order.

In a certain sense that is what regular Sunday worship does for us. It gives us a still point in a rapidly moving world. It is a way of prioritizing. It is the same principal of why busy people seem to be able to do more. They have a set of priorities; they line up these priorities and everything seems to fall into place.

The Season of Lent is ahead of us. Shortly, you will be receiving in the mail your Lenten Menu. The most important thing you can do for Lent, and for all of us, is to get your worship right. Sunday worship is essential and integral to our life. It is a concrete way of putting God first; and once we do that, everything else will follow.

Like the leper in today’s Gospel, when we ask for healing, we are asking to be restored to proper worship. Sunday Mass has the potential to put order in our lives and, eventually, in the world. All people will be drawn to our worship of the one true God, and all that God has dreamed of for us will be restored.