

SUNDAY YEAR A – 08 (Homily 01)

“Priorities of Faith”

(Isaiah 49:14-15; Ps 62; 1 Cor 4:1-5; Mt 6:24-34)

A story recounted by Adam Exner, Archbishop emeritus Vancouver, fits in with the readings today. As a young priest, he was travelling to the East on the train and happened to be seated in the same compartment as a harried businessman who tested his patience with his complaints. This man had a beef against almost everyone in his life, and about almost everything. He filled the hours with complaints about his wife, his job, his boss, the government, his kids and more, ad nauseum. Finally Adam interjected with the concise comment, “Sir, it seems to be that you don’t know who you are, where you are from, and where you are going.” The man’s face turned pale; he stammered to a stop, and then the two of them had an earnest, heart-to-heart talk about the meaning of life, and this man’s situation.

Some time later, Adam was walking down the corridor in another part of the train, when it made an unscheduled stop at a station in a small town in Ontario. Curious as to why the train had stopped, Adam looked out a window and noticed a stretcher being carried off the train many cars back. “Somebody must have had a heart attack or something similar”, he thought to himself with a silent prayer for that person, and the hope that it was not too serious or fatal, as the train resumed its journey.

When he finally made his way back to his place, he found that his companion was not there. It was he who had been carried off the train on a stretcher. To this day he has no idea what happened, whether the man was alive or not, but he was encouraged and his heart deeply warmed by his last memory of the man – their heart to heart conversation that perhaps had given this man a last chance to come to terms with the many troublesome issues in his life – to at least, at the 11th hour, come to some inkling of who he was, where he was from, and where he was going.

The readings today invite us to take stock of our lives, to see who we are, where we are from, and where we are going. In short, we are invited to set priorities that will build up the reign of God.

The first reading today from Isaiah is quite poignant. It is obvious that Isaiah, holy person that he is, is experiencing the apparent absence of God, and questioning God, perhaps like or business man in the story. This is a phenomenon of the spiritual life that is difficult for the ordinary person to understand. It usually

involves painful suffering and facing imposing challenges on the part of the person who is experiencing this situation. What looks like a lack of faith and a weak spirituality, however, is actually the opposite. It is really a testing of a person's strong faith, an opportunity to grow even stronger in that faith.

The person who most dramatically experienced this apparent absence of God is Jesus himself on the cross. He who was so intimately connected to the Father, who was so strongly bonded to the Father in love, felt abandoned by that same Father when he was on the cross. There was no consolation, no sense of God's presence, no sign of God's caring – just silence within the extreme violence committed against him. Jesus cried out in anguish, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me.”

The key to understanding that cry, however, is that those words introduce Psalm 22, which ends as a sincere act of faith heartfelt trust in the final vindication of God, even when his presence is not felt in one's lived circumstance. The song the sings, “I believe in the sun, even when it is not shining; I believe in love, even when there's no one there, and I believe in God, even when he is silent” is very fitting here. This passage also became the content of Cary Landy's familiar hymn, “Isaiah 49” in which he sings, “I will never forget you, my people” in which he highlights a beautiful feminine image of God as a mother who would never forget her child or ignore the child within her womb.

Another person who experienced this apparent absence of God was Mother Theresa of Calcutta. After she died, her spiritual director wrote a book describing how ever since she began her work in India, she lost any sense of the nearness of God. Her prayer life was dry and uneventful. There was daily desolation instead of consolation. This revelation shocked the world, and some of the media judged her to be lacking in faith.

The reality is just the opposite. Her faith was so strong, so intense, that she was given the privilege of suffering in her life the same way that Jesus suffered on the cross, to experience the apparent absence of God. And she responded as Jesus did. She continued to minister even joyfully to the poor and dying, running an international congregation of women, without complaining publically to anyone other than her spiritual director. Hers was the faith of Jesus, and she was given the same test of faith he was given, because her faith was strong, not weak.

As our faith in the love of God grows stronger, especially in the moments of suffering, trial and confusion in our own lives, we can expect to experience much

smaller doses of that test of faith. Rabbi Kushner was touching on this experience in our lives when he wrote the book, "When Bad Things Happen to Good People." That is precisely a book on the testing of faith.

The Gospel, for its part, challenges us to have a strong faith in God that is able to set kingdom priorities, to put first things first, to let go of distractions and pettiness in our faith life. We are called to a stronger faith and trust in God. The call is to a unique way of life trusting God. This was the call that was felt so strongly by Blessed Emilie Gamelin, the founder of the Sisters of Providence. She put her total trust in God's providence so deeply that she named her congregation precisely to reflect that strong faith stance of trusting each day that God would provide, the God's providence would always be there for them.

Each day that is given to us is an opportunity to grow in faith by trusting God more fully, and by putting into place in our lives priorities for the kingdom that will reflect our faith and trust in God's love. Probably the best rule of thumb to guide us in this path is the Great Commandment that Jesus taught us. Are we putting God and God's will for us first through praise, worship and humble obedience? Are we putting love of all other people in second place, lived out by acts of caring and sharing life with others? This would include even praying for our enemies, forgiving those who have hurt us, and asking for forgiveness from anyone we have hurt in any way. And lastly, are we putting love of self in the third place, accepting ourselves as we are, forgiving ourselves for our own mistakes, and accepting compliments and affirmation from others?

The Eucharist that we celebrate now is a clear sign that we are already living out that Great Commandment. We are here to worship God because we have made that a priority. We are worshipping together and fellowshiping with each other because we have made that a priority. And we are also growing in our love for ourselves as children of God and disciples of Jesus Christ.

So remember, the reign of God happens in us and among us as we exercise our faith by putting into place in our lives, kingdom priorities. We will clearly know who we are, where we are from, and where we are going.