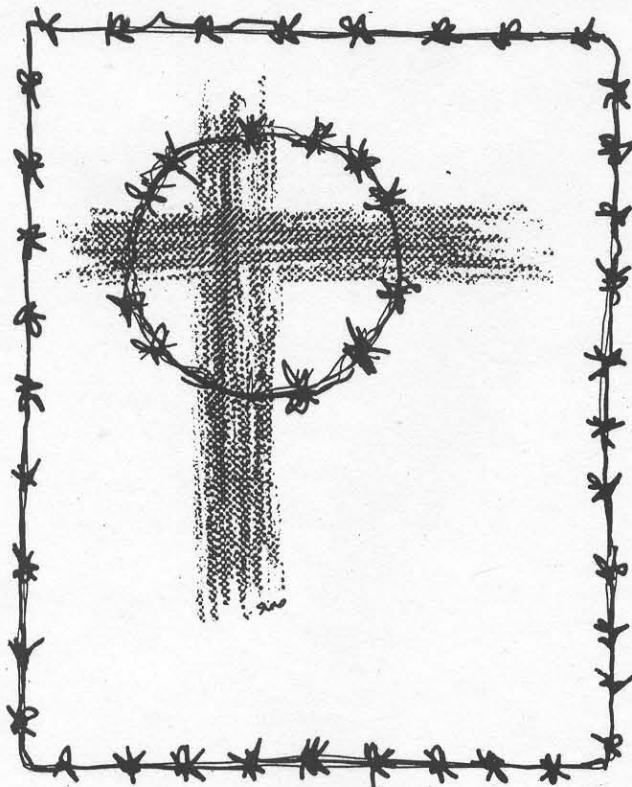


SECOND WEEK OF LENT...SECOND WEEK OF LENT...



God's great advantage Monday, Feb. 24

Daniel 9: 4-10
Psalm 79, v. 8, 9, 11, 13
Luke 6: 36-38

One of my good friends says it's important to have people you don't know very well so that you have someone you can criticize. Once we know someone, and know something of the experiences and complications in their lives, it becomes a lot harder to condemn them.

It strikes me that this is God's great advantage over us in being able to be compassionate and forgiving to everyone: God knows every heart. God sees us rushing to do all the things we have to do, preoccupied with decisions about which of the things we ought to do will remain undone, and struggling with guilt over not being able to do it all.

The Israelites struggled, too. In their failure to obey the prophets and to live by the law given by the prophets, I imagine they were much like us. Like us, they were busy in the courses of their lives. They were sometimes too busy to think about whether they were really responding to God's call or fulfilling their part of the Covenant with the religious habits they'd developed over the years. And, like us, they couldn't be sure who were the prophets and who were the crackpots among those who called them to change their ways.

We, too have prophets among us. We, too, may someday cry out our sorrow to God for not having listened to them. But among those calling for us to follow their ways, who are God's prophets ... and who are the crackpots? It can be very hard to decide.

When Jesus tells us not to judge, he doesn't mean that we shouldn't judge right from wrong, or try to judge which of the voices in our world are those of the prophets. What he means is that we shouldn't judge others who, in their struggle with life, come to different conclusions than we do. He calls us to have faith that others are trying as hard as we are to follow the way of God and only God knows what path each of us should take.

What about Isaac? Sunday, Feb. 23

Gen. 22: 1-2, 9, 10-13, 15-18
Romans 8: 31-34
Mark 9: 2-10

In this story of Abraham and his great faith in being willing to sacrifice his son whom he loved, I always wonder about Isaac. What was it like for Isaac?

What was it like for this boy who knew exactly what happened at a holocaust, to be lifted up onto that altar by his father that he trusted? Where was God for him as he looked up to see the sun glint off his father's raised knife?

In the Gospel story, the other son to be offered as sacrifice is given a conversation with Moses and Elijah and is then assured by God that he is God's beloved. Jesus leaves that meeting knowing a truth that ultimately carries him to Calvary. That truth, the truth he preached, is that he is God's beloved ... and so are we all.

Joseph Campbell, in his talks on myths of death and resurrection, points out that they express the truth that life ... all life ... our life ... depends on the death of others. Physically we see this truth in every harvester and slaughterhouse. Spiritually, we see it in Jesus ... and Isaac ... and in all those who've ever sacrificed for love. It seems we humans need to see that God's love is great enough to die for to even begin to believe in God's love for us.

Isaac didn't die on his mountain. But he left it knowing he was his father's beloved, a cherished gift of God. Jesus did die to tell us that we are all Isaac.

Religious 'merit badges' Tuesday, Feb. 25

Isaiah 1: 10, 16-20
Psalm 50: 8-9, 16-17, 21, 23
Matthew 23: 1-12

The stories of Sodom and Gomorrah are a warning to people whose lives revolve only around "sex, drugs, and rock-and-roll." When the stories are read at Mass, it's easy for me to feel righteous, given the distance in miles and attitudes between Potsdam and the Haite-Ashbury! After all, I'm at Mass! But before the "well, I don't have to worry about *that*" relaxation can settle in, the Gospel reading warns me not to start showing off religious merit badges as proof of my holiness.

Religious symbols are good, but can be used for both good and bad ends. They can be used both by the prophets and the crackpots. Most recently, we all had our foreheads smudged with ashes as a sign of our repentance for sin. For those of us at the 6:45 a.m. Mass, facing the workday requires a decision about the ashes. Wearing the ashes to work can be a holier-than-thou display of a religious merit badge. But conveniently letting my hat rub them off can be an attempt to hide my faith from more secular people. But each year I know people who do both, and each year I struggle with what to do.

The real ashes of repentance should be in our hearts. God knows the truth about those. How we deal with those on our heads has to be an individual choice. Only I know in my heart if I want to "show off" my ashes or if I'm hesitant to be publicly Catholic. I figure I ought to choose the response to the ashes that is least comfortable. So I don't wear a hat as I drive to work, even in the snow ... but I thank God that I'm not bald.

SECOND WEEK OF LENT... SECOND WEEK OF LENT...

Who are the prophets?

Wednesday, Feb, 26

Jeremiah 18: 18-20
Psalm 31: 5-6, 14, 15-16
Matthew 20: 17-28

Jesus warns us again today against merit badges. But today it is a warning against striving to earn them. Those plotting against the prophet Jeremiah realized that none of their paths to religious merit ... instructions from the priests, counsel from the wise, messages from the prophets ... would be impeded by Jeremiah's death. For us reading from "The Book of the Prophet Jeremiah," it's easy to identify him as a prophet and see their error. It's much harder to listen to the reading as an admonishment about our own error. In this passage, I think that God is warning us against thinking that all of the prophets were in the past.

For the ancient Israelites, the road to holiness was built into the structures of their culture and institutions so there was no need for prophets challenging them. They were following all the rules and thought Jeremiah was just a crackpot. It can be easy to think that we already know the whole truth and have no more need for prophets. But surely they must be among us.

Today's first reading calls me to look at those called crackpots by one side or another and meditate on who may be a prophet. Is Hans Kung the Jeremiah of our day? Or is Mother Angelica a prophet? There are good and holy people following each. How do we judge?

Jesus, who was certainly thought a crackpot by most, gives us help on this issue in his warning about merit badges. If you wish to follow Jesus into the Kingdom of God, you must serve the needs of all and drink of his cup of humiliation and sacrifice. When we look for who to obey as a prophet, we must look for the servants, for those who wear their phylacteries as an act of devotion, not exhibition. But we never know for anyone but ourselves whose act of humility is wearing the ashes, and whose is washing them off.

Truth will keep being told

Thursday, Feb 27

Jeremiah 17: 5-10
Psalm 1: 1-2, 3, 4, 6
Luke 16: 19-31

In the parable about Lazarus and the rich man, when the rich man requests a messenger to tell of his plight, Abraham's answer seems to feed the idea that all the prophets are in the past. The twist in this Gospel reading, though, is that the one telling the story is Jesus ... the very messenger the rich man requested! So does Abraham's response to the rich man not represent the attitude of Jesus or God? Why would Jesus tell the story if it didn't?

In Abraham's words, Jesus is telling us that the truth he speaks is not new. He is also telling us that it will keep being told in spite of not being heard and that there will always be those who won't hear. There will always be those who read their own truth, or the culture's truth into the word of God, instead of seeking God's truth. The cultural truth in the time of Jesus taught the rich that their wealth was a sign of God's favor.

This cultural truth still lives as we in America acknowledge our blessings while we legislate to deny essential social benefits to our own citizens and legal immigrants. Some here would deny even education to illegal immigrant children. Will we look across the chasm at drowned Haitians, starved Africans, and deported Mexicans resting in the bosom of Abraham while we thirst? The thirst of this country that trusts in the flesh of abundant natural resources, exploding technologies, and nuclear weapons we balk at destroying, can already sometimes be felt during the evening news.

These reflections on the scripture readings for the Second Week of Lent were written by Aileen O'Donoghue, a commissioned lay minister from St. Mary's Parish in Potsdam

Rejecting God's cornerstone

Friday, Feb. 28

Genesis 37: 3-4, 12-13, 17-28
Psalm 105: 16-17, 18-19, 20-21
Matthew 21: 33-43, 45-46

In today's Gospel, Jesus tells the chief priests and elders that because they rejected the cornerstone that God has given, the kingdom of God will be taken away "and given to a nation that will yield a rich harvest." I don't think it's far from people's minds that Christian Europe then Christian America are the nations to which God had given the kingdom. Indeed, I imagine they once were ... as were the Jews of a time earlier than Jesus.

The Church teaches us that the word of God is alive and active. That's why it is proclaimed by a live person at every Mass. The word of God is about us. The word of God is about now. Of the two nations Jesus speaks of, the one rejecting God's cornerstone and the one that will receive the kingdom, which is ours? Is there a stone we have rejected? Is there a favored child of our heavenly Father, a child of our own family that we have sold into slavery, or killed?

Perhaps God's favored children were sold long ago by Americans when those who fled persecution brought forth the cries of persecuted Indians. Perhaps God's cornerstone was rejected in the thousands of buffalo left to rot on the plains. Perhaps God's cornerstone was rejected more recently as our industries dumped waste into the shining seas and spacious skies to make plastic wrappers and bottles that we buried in heaps. Perhaps God's favored child is being sold into the slavery of ignorance now as a small child with a foreign accent sent away from school.

Which nation are we in today's Gospel?

More fathers and sons

Saturday, March 1

Micah 7: 14-15, 18-20
Psalm 103: 1-2, 3-4, 9-10, 11-12
Luke 15: 1-3, 11-32

This week began with the stories of sons asked to be sacrifices for their fathers. The story of two more sons ends this second week of Lent. In between, the readings have warned us about judging others and ourselves. We've been warned that focusing too much on "sex, drugs, and rock-n-roll" and on obtaining religious merit badges can distract us from our call to follow Jesus' call to love. We've been warned that we as a people can sin just as the ancient Israelites did.

Today, though, we are told of God's forgiveness even when we do all that we've been admonished against. In Jesus' parable about the two sons, one falls off the Sodom and Gomorrah side of the road to holiness, and one falls off the phylactery-widening side. The father loves and forgives both sons.

Most of us who read the *North Country Catholic* are much more likely to behave as the older son who dutifully stayed while the younger took the high road to adventure. How often I hear my own voice saying "... after I've worked so long, I only get ..." And I see the older son refusing to go in to the party. Getting myself to go into the party, to accept living in the Kingdom of God, will take a true leap of faith. Loving my brothers and sisters is the first step. Getting through the door will take knowing that God has loved me with abundant, overflowing, joyous love all along. God loves me even when I stand refusing to come into the party.

Who is there like this God who will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea?