

18th Sunday OT – (Year B) – August 5, 2018

EX 16:2-4, 12-15; PS 78:3-4, 23-24, 25, 54; EPH 4:17, 20-24; JN 6:24-35

There's a distinctly Irish way of greeting someone who returns home after being away. I was reminded of it this past Thursday after the 6:15AM Mass when Sr. Raphael walked in to the sacristy, and, instead of saying "**Welcome home**"—in the typically **American** way—she smiled, gave me a hug and said, "**You are welcome home**" in that touchingly *Irish* way.

Now since this is the **Welcome Back to School Mass**, and since our school has such deep Irish roots—I will "**borrow**" that greeting from Sr. Raphael to say to all of you—both the **returning school families**—and those who are **just joining our parish and school family**:

"You...are...welcome home to Ss. Simon & Jude Cathedral School!"

This kind of personalized greeting is part of the secret recipe that constitutes the culture with which the Loreto Sisters have imbued Ss. Simon & Jude Cathedral School for decades—that intangible quality that everyone senses once they encounter it, even if they can't identify precisely what makes it that way.

Language is important—not only in creating a **Catholic school culture**, but also in **understanding the larger culture** of our society.

This focus on language, brought to mind by Sister's greeting a few days ago reminds me of another aspect of language brought to my attention by **Fr. Mitch Pacwa**, a well-known priest on EWTN, who gave a retreat to us priests here in the Diocese of Phoenix a few years ago.

During the dinner conversation one night, Fr. Pacwa made a very interesting observation. He said that kids today are so terrified of being perceived as **judgmental** or **condemning** that they no longer use the word "**wrong**" to describe things that are—*well*—**wrong**! Instead, they use the word "**annoying**" to express their "**discomfort**" with things that are **wrong**, in order to avoid sounding "**judgmental**".

As a result, **bad things** are no longer **objectively wrong**—just **subjectively bothersome**—in the minds of many of our **young people**...not to mention many of us *not-so-young people*!

Such word choices have real consequences. Because, over time, if bad things go **unchallenged**, they become **tolerated**...then they become **accepted**...and, in some cases they even become “**good**” from some people’s point of view. Our sickly society even exalts some **evils** to the point of “**human right**” while simultaneously relegating an **actual good**—like the **Christian faith**—to the level of **toleration** at best...or *suppression* at worst. Here we must recall the words of the Prophet Isaiah:

Woe to those who call evil good and good evil... (Isa 5:20)

Taken to its extreme, the truth becomes so obscured for many people, that they begin to believe there **is** no truth—no *objective* truth—just “**your truth**” and “**my truth**”. And if everyone has their *own* truth, well then *the truth* ceases to mean *anything*, and you end up with a society that looks like ours today—where everything *that used to be common sense*—from **male** and **female** to **marriage** and **family** is up for *redefinition*, based on an individual’s **prevailing feelings** at any given moment.

Language matters! Because the things we say reveal what we hold in our **minds** and **hearts**. Our words reveal our **beliefs**...our **desires**...and our **priorities**.

We can see this dynamic at play in today’s Readings, particularly in the **1st Reading** from Exodus and in our **Gospel**. Let’s start with **Exodus**:

...in the wilderness the whole Israelite community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The Israelites said to them, “If only we had died at the LORD’s hand in the land of Egypt, as we sat by our kettles of meat and ate our fill of bread! But you have led us into this wilderness to make this whole assembly die of famine!” (Ex 16:2-3)

Let’s not forget that these are the **same people** whom God had freed from slavery in Egypt by working **astounding miracles** through Moses. How quickly they **forgot God’s favor for them** when they discovered that the journey from their

country of bondage to the *Promised Land of freedom* was not going to be a “**cake walk**” but rather, a difficult trek through a treacherous desert, during which they were going to have to depend on the Lord to provide for their needs.

With their stomachs growling, and exhausted from the journey, the thought of **relinquishing** their **freedom** and **dignity** suddenly didn't seem so bad to them—as long as they could **stuff their bellies**. Their joy at being liberated from crushing labor was quickly displaced by their memories of their **slave rations** of *bread* and *meat*. Their words revealed just how little they trusted the God who had freed them, and just how much they preferred to return to slavery rather than suffer on the way to a **greater** and *lasting* good.

Now, turning to our **2nd Reading**, we can better see what **St. Paul** was warning his readers about. But, this time around, as we listen to his words, were going to include two skipped verses—**verses 18 and 19**—from this 4th Chapter of his **Letter to the Ephesians** that were not included in the Lectionary Reading today. He writes:

...I declare and testify in the Lord that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds; darkened in understanding, alienated from the life of God because of their ignorance, because of their hardness of heart, they have become callous and have handed themselves over to licentiousness for the practice of every kind of impurity to excess. That is not how you learned Christ, assuming that you have heard of him and were taught in him, as truth is in Jesus, that you should put away the old self of your former way of life, corrupted through deceitful desires, and be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and put on the new self, created in God's way in righteousness and holiness of truth. (Eph 4:17, 20-24)

This excerpt from his letter speaks directly to the dynamic in the 1st Reading. The Chosen People—whom God had freed from their Egyptian slave masters—were slipping back into a Gentile way of thinking—alienating themselves from God because of their hardness of heart, willing to return to their former life of forced labor if that's what it took to get a plateful of food.

Now, as so often is the case in the dynamic between the Old and New Testaments—this desert incident foreshadows the encounter that Jesus had in the

Gospel today with a large group of people who had just witnessed an amazing miracle—his feeding more than 5,000 people, starting with only a few portions of bread and fish. Observing their behavior—and listening to their words—it’s as though Jesus had done **nothing out of the ordinary** the evening before.

The Gospel tells us:

When the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they themselves got into boats and came to Capernaum looking for Jesus. And when they found him across the sea they said to him, “Rabbi, when did you get here?” Jesus answered them and said, “Amen, amen, I say to you, you are looking for me not because you saw signs but because you ate the loaves and were filled. Do not work for food that perishes but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.” (Jn 6:24-27)

Clearly, Jesus is not afraid of being considered “**judgmental**” as are so many people today who cower in the face of the slightest opposition. **He saw the people’s hypocrisy and called them out for it.** He was more concerned with their **well-being**...with their *salvation*...than with his own **popularity**.

Jesus didn’t come to top an opinion poll.

He came to save us from slavery to sin—a *self-imposed* slavery.

At this point in the Gospel, Jesus was preparing the people for the Eucharist—something even greater than the food—the **manna**—that his Father had sent to the people in the desert back in Moses’ time. In other words, Jesus desired to feed their souls, **in addition to** their stomachs.

But the people in the Gospel today couldn’t look beyond their *last meal*, let alone beyond **this life**, to see what really mattered. And while *we* might be tempted to blast them for their **blindness** and **ignorance**, we first need to stop and examine the ways *we* pursue “**food that perishes**” at the cost of our own relationship with Jesus—how we prefer *slavery to pleasure and comfort* to the fulfilment of our **destiny as beloved sons and daughters of God the Father** and the completion of our journey through **this life** into *eternal* life.

I was reminded of this tendency — so **frustrating** to Jesus — and so **prevalent** today — in a message that someone posted on **YouTube** regarding our Sunday televised Mass. The commenter wrote:

“Thanks. I love watching Sunday mass when I can’t go to church because of my baseball. God bless”

I’m pretty sure this message was from a kid. And how **amazing**...and how **sad** at the same time...is this short statement. He recognizes that his heart that is touched by the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.

But he also acknowledges that a certain **“food that perishes”** — in this case, not **actual** food, but rather, **baseball** — prevents him, at least **occasionally** if not **frequently**, from feeding on the food that lasts for eternal life — the **Eucharist**. Perhaps what’s most disturbing of all is how many Catholics would consider this **normal** and **acceptable** — to **regularly** put **sports** ahead of the **soul** on the list of priorities.

If you don’t believe me — *if you don’t believe that this kind of dynamic is considered normal and acceptable by many Catholics* — then ask yourselves **honestly** if you said to yourselves — after I read the kid’s comment:

“What’s wrong with that? So, he misses Mass occasionally for a baseball game!”

It occurred to me early this morning that Jesus’ frustration with the **bread beggars** who followed him across the lake is a lot like the frustration that so many of us have with the **people populating our street corners** with their **cardboard signs**. So many of us have **said**, or at least **thought**:

“There’s already so much help available for these people. They can go to a shelter. They can get free food from St. Vincent de Paul. They can get help getting on their feet and landing a job. Why do they insist on begging?”

God question, huh?

You can just imagine God the Father, shaking his head and half-smiling at us *as we do the very same with him*, approaching him with our **cardboard prayers** full of **self-serving petitions** meant to **manipulate his heart to get what we want**.

And yet...it's not just **Little Leaguers** or **street corner beggars** who reject the *full meal deal* in favor of **spiritual junk food**.

How common it is today for adults to stand in line for **hours** or even *days* for the latest **smartphone**, even though they have the same **phone drawer** or **phone box** that we *all* have—*full of dusty phones and tangled cords that no longer fit the new phones*.

And yet...how many of these same **phone junkies** rarely darken the door of the church, let alone stand in line for Confession, in order to be able to receive—freely—the **food that endures for eternal life**—the *Eucharist*? A year or two from now, the phone they are selling their souls to get *today* will be added to the heap of still **functioning** but no longer *fashionable* phones in their **cellular cemetery**...and they'll wonder why their **home is full of stuff**, while their **soul is devoid of peace**.

And many will blame God for their **empty hearts** and **joyless lives**!

Every Sunday, the living word of God in the Sacred Scriptures challenges us to examine our **consciences** and to examine our **lives** to see whether or not the love that God offers us each moment is **penetrating our heart** or **bouncing off its hardened shell**.

We demand signs from God that he cares about us—which so often really means, we demand that he fill our stomachs with “food that perishes” ... as we fill our **lives** with more *junk* we don't need...and our **schedules** with more *activities* that squeeze God out of the **picture**...and out of our *hearts*.

Perhaps it's time for us to put down the **cardboard sign of our short-sighted prayers** and gratefully accept the greatest sign of God the Father's love for his lost sheep: His Son—*Jesus Christ*—our **Savior**—and our *food*.