

Eighth Sunday of the Year February 26, 2017

Readings: Isaiah 49:14-15; 1 Corinthians 4:1-5; Matthew 6:24-34

God is always faithful to his people and to his promises. Even when we turn away from him and place our trust in ourselves or in other persons or in money or material goods, he will not abandon us but will remain faithful. When everything else fails we have a sure hope that there is the God who is waiting for us. In the Gospel Jesus reminds us that we are God's precious children. He loves and cares for us. He tells us not to worry as nature's abundance clearly demonstrates how much God loves us. If he cares so much the flowers and grass in the field surely he will take greater care of each one of us. The knowledge of this truth should free us from fretting and worrying. Jesus urges us to let go of worry, and to trust in the love and care of God for us. The Christian must put his future in the hands of God. At the same time he warns us that our loyalty should not be divided but we must totally trust him. In the first reading the Prophet presents the feeling of Israel that God has forgotten them. But God assures them of a love beyond their imagination. His love for his people is far beyond the love of a mother for her child. The prophet tells the people that he has already carved their name on the palm of his hand. Such is his love. In the second reading Paul refers to himself and other preachers as servants of Christ. They are the stewards faithfully performing their task. At the same time he cautions them that God will judge the quality of their work. He invites them into a spirit of perseverance into the spirit of Christ.

In today's first reading from Isaiah, God shows his deep concern towards the Israelites, his chosen people. The people had endured years of exile in Babylon. With their kingdom a distant memory, and with no prospect of return to their motherland, the people express their fear that God has forgotten them. Zion which is a poetic name for Jerusalem, speaks for all the people as she laments that God has completely forgotten her. An immediate response from God forcefully shows how wrong Zion is. The oracle compares the bond between mother and child. Human frailty can weaken even that close bond but God's love for Zion is not subject to such a weakness. The response comes from God in one of the tenderest passages in the whole of the Bible: "Does a woman forget her baby at the breast, or fail to cherish the son of her womb? Yet even if these forget, I will never forget you." He reassures them that even if a mother could

forget her own child, he will never forget any of his creation. One of the greatest hurts a person can suffer is to be forgotten and being ignored by his own community. The prophet tells the people how God remembers them, protects them, supports them and takes care of them. This assertion is especially significant in the Old Testament and in the Book of Isaiah it is presented in the form of parent child relationship between God and Israel.

In the second reading of today Paul writes to the Corinthians about being good servants of Christ. We are, he says, Christ's servants and as such, responsibilities have been entrusted to us, mainly to build up the Body of Christ in our Christian communities and to spread the Gospel message of God's love far and wide. What is expected of a servant is that each one should be found worthy of God's trust. In other words, we are not being trustworthy caretakers then we take the gift that God has given us and bury it in the ground for fear it should be lost. Our gifts are to be used here and now and every day. We should simply be too busy doing God's work to have time to worry about the non-existent future. Paul clarifies the roles of Apollos, Cephas and himself. They are servants of Christ, stewards of divine mysteries. Since they work for God, the important thing is that they remain trustworthy in their ministry. In this passage Paul focuses on himself. Only God can pass judgment on the work performed by Paul. Even if he is not conscious of slacking off in his ministry, he does not claim to be innocent of wrongdoing. When Christ comes he will certainly enlighten the motives of Paul. He tells the people that they are Christ's servants. And as such many responsibilities have been entrusted to them, mainly to build up the Body of Christ in the Christian communities and to spread the Gospel message of God's love far and wide. Paul says, "What is expected of stewards is that each one should be found worthy of God's trust."

The Gospel of today begins with a strong statement of Jesus that a person cannot serve two masters and he puts it very bluntly: "You cannot at the same time be the slave of God and money." Authentic discipleship requires undivided faith commitment. Divided loyalties sooner or later result in disaster. Jesus in his Sermon stresses that a person cannot serve God and wealth. As such, Jesus does not criticize the possessing of material things. What is in question is the person's attitude towards them, how he values them, having his life controlled by them and, above all, being unable to share them with those in real need. Also in question is the false illusion that, if we have money and power, we have the control of our lives. We are secure. Nothing could be further from the truth. So

ultimately Jesus is teaching us that our only real security is total trust in God's and his love for us. Money primarily is a means of exchange by which we can provide for the needs of our life at any given point of time. The problem begins when money and the pursuit of money becomes an end in itself. Jesus is asking his disciples to reflect on what are our most basic values in our lives. We have to make a choice between the God's vision of life and a preoccupation with money and material possessions. They are not compatible. They involve conflicting goals in life and different visions of what is most important in life. The truly materialistic person may have undertaken Christian practice but cannot be a really committed Christian.

In this Gospel passage Jesus exhorts his disciples not to worry. His approach to life might seem flippant, irresponsible and a recipe for disaster. He teaches that we should not worry about what we are going to eat or what we are going to wear. Jesus, who knew humanity better than anyone ever has, must have realized that simply telling someone not to worry does not end the worrying. So, he goes on to give a perspective to allay their worries, a sense of priorities. Then he goes on to ask what good their worrying does. Worry solves nothing and examples of nature show that God will provide. Then he reminds them that God takes care of even the birds of the air and the grass in the field, and surely God will take greater care of the people created in his own image. He tells the disciples not to worry but to keep their priorities straight. Again he reminds them that worrying doesn't do any good. Jesus goes on to prove that worry is in any event useless. He says that by worrying no man can add even a bit to his height or lengthen his life span. What is needed is the trust God and continues working on the human situation. Only God the creator has his control over the changes in any human person. Then he goes on to speak about the flowers and he speaks about them as one who loved them deeply. The lilies of the field were the scarlet poppies or wild flowers which bloomed for one day on the hillsides of Palestine. Their life span was brief but their beauty was marvelous and appreciable which surpassed the dresses of kings and nobles. When these flowers died they were used only as a fuel. The point is that a little flower which lasts but a day and later becomes fuel is cared for by God, then how much more he cares for his dear creation.

Jesus goes further to say that worry is a basic distrust in God. Such distrust may be the characteristics of a heathen who believes in a jealous, capricious and unpredictable god. A Christian cannot worry because he trusts in the abundance of the love of God. Jesus tells his disciples how to overcome that worry. First is to

concentrate on the Kingdom of God, which is to fulfill the will of God and live according to his precepts. A deep love of God takes away all worries. Secondly, Jesus says that worry can be defeated when we acquire the art of living one day at a time and by not worrying about tomorrow. If each day is lived as it comes, if each task is done as it appears, then the sum of the entire day is bound to be good. If a person worries of the unknown future, nothing will happen and it will not bring any change. Here Jesus is telling us about the faith commitment in God and not to rely on wealth and material possessions. At the same time we realize the rampant poverty around the world and this does not call us to be complacent. What we need is the faith and our full trust in divine providence. For all believers and non-believers this portion of the Sermon on the Mount contains a profound encouragement, as well as a call for greater faith. It calls for trust in God, who provides for our every need, no matter how small and insignificant we are. God has a wonderful plan for our lives, and takes care of us. Even in difficult times, when it seems that God doesn't care, we can put our trust in the Lord and focus our attention on his Kingdom.

We must not, however, think that Jesus is forbidding us from working hard, planning and saving for our future, or even having legitimate concerns about life's demands. We obviously need to care for the needs of those around us, be conscientious in carrying out our responsibilities, or even save for our future needs. Jesus is commanding us to cease from being "concerned" in a way that is sinful— to cease from worry or anxiety. It is about our need for trusting in a God, who is benevolent and generous towards everyone, who knows our needs and provides for us. This is called the Biblical doctrine of God's 'providence'. God has created the universe and everything in it and he takes care of every living and non-living being in this world. To worry is to deny, in practice, the doctrine of God's providence. It tells God that we don't trust Him, that we don't believe He will really take care of us. It says that we know more than he does about our situation. This is a contradiction for us Christians. That is why Peter tells us in his first letter to place all our worries upon God, for he cares for everyone.

In our day to day situation we must keep in mind the advice of Jesus that we do not have any need to worry. Worry is futile and by worrying, a person cannot add anything to his life and improve his situation. Secondly, we do not need to worry, because we are of great value to our heavenly Father as we are precious to him. He is a benevolent Father and we will never have to persuade him, the God of the

universe to care for us because he already does it for us. At the same time Jesus says that the omniscient father knows all about us and he will not permit us to worry regarding our food and drink for he himself will provide them to us. In fact the Gospel passage that refers to the God, who feeds the birds of the air and clothes the wild flowers of the field, is unparalleled in its literary richness. But for millions of believers and non-believers alike, this portion of the Sermon on the Mount contains a profound encouragement, as well as a call for greater faith. It calls for trust in God, who provides for our every need, no matter how small and insignificant we are. God has a wonderful plan for our lives, and part of that plan includes taking care of us. Even in difficult times, when it seems that God doesn't care, we can put our trust in the Lord and focus our attention on his Kingdom. Worry is needless, useless and even positively injurious. Our worry cannot affect the past that has gone by and the future which is uncertain. Worry is blind as it refuses to learn the lesson of nature. Worry is irreligious as it keeps God out of the situation and places the trust on human person. Hence Jesus commands us: Take no anxious thought of the morrow, showing that it is the way not only to peace but also to power.

Hence Jesus urges us to liberate ourselves from all worry and anxiety about our body and material things such as food and clothing. To be concerned about food because right now I am very hungry and do not have anything to eat is very different from worrying whether I will have food at a later date. To worry intensely of one's health is dangerous. Worry and anxiety about the future are a waste of time and energy yet we indulge in them so much. They are a waste of time and energy because they are about things which do not exist and very possibly may never exist. They do nothing except be themselves and God takes care of them. They are beautiful but when their time comes they just pass away. We are often so busy regretting the past or worrying about the future that we never get to enjoy life in the here and now.

It was said that Nathaniel Hawthorne went home one evening to tell his wife that he had lost his job at the custom house. She surprised him with joy and told him now's the time he can write his book. She told him that he was talented and all her life she had wished that he would do it. But he asked her on what they would survive in the meantime. She opened the drawer and showed him the weekly savings she had made from the household expense money and that would take them through the year. The result was the book *Scarlet Letters*.

A doctor had gone to visit his sick patient and his pet dog followed him. He was kept outside and was not allowed to enter the patient's room and the door was closed. The old man was very sick and was about to die. He held the doctor's hand and said, doctor I do not want to die. Tell me how it is on the other side of the world. Doctor said he knew absolutely nothing and he could not help. The sick man was shocked and said Doctor how can you say this? Is not there anything we can hope for? The doctor closed his eyes. Just then he heard the scratching on the door by his dog and he said. Look there is my dog outside and I have closed the door. He cannot see me but he knows I am there. So he is scratching the door and I know he will come and I will welcome him. So will it be the other side. We know He the God is there and we have to go on scratching and he will open and receive us. There is the hope.

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