

FATHER O'CONNOR'S HOMILY FOR 9 JUNE 2024
TENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME-B

Genesis 3: 9-15
2 Corinthians 4: 13 – 5: 1
Mark 3: 20-35

There is a story about a country preacher whose sermon topic was “Noah and the Ark.”

Unknown to him, two pages of the large Bible on the pulpit had stuck together when he began to read his text. “Noah took himself a wife,” he began, “and she was . . .” He paused for a moment as he turned the stuck pages . . . “and she was . . . 300 cubits long, 50 cubits wide and 30 cubits high.”

He stopped reading, looked puzzled and said to the congregation, “I’ve been reading this old Bible for more than fifty years, and there are still some things that make me scratch my head.”

Well, I have to agree that there are some things in the Bible that can make us scratch our heads. A good example is in today’s Gospel passage about Jesus’ rocky relationship with some members of His family. We read: “Jesus came home with His disciples. Again the crowd gathered, making it impossible for them even to eat.”

Now listen to this next line, and remember that Mark is talking about Jesus: “When His relatives heard of this they set out to seize Him, for they said, ‘He is out of His mind.’”

What made His relatives feel that way about Jesus?

1) Jesus had left home and the carpenter’s business in Nazareth. No sensible person, they must have been thinking, would abandon a business where the money came in every week to become a wandering preacher who had no place to lay His head at night.

2) Jesus was obviously on the way to a head-on collision with the Jewish leaders of His day. There are certain people in life who can do you a great deal of harm, people whose right side it seems better to be on. No one could take on the Scribes and the Pharisees and the other Jewish leaders of the day and hope to get away with it.

3) Jesus started a little society of His own, and it seemed to be a very odd one. It included some fishermen and a tax collector and a fanatical nationalist among them. They were not the kind of people that an upward-bound person would want to be associated with.

By His actions, Jesus made it clear that three laws by which people tend to organize their lives meant nothing to Him.

1) Jesus had thrown away security. Security is the one thing that most people in this world want more than anything else.

2) Jesus had thrown away safety. Many people strive to play it safe. A course of action which involves risk-taking is something which they purposely avoid.

3) Jesus had shown Himself to be utterly indifferent to the verdict of society. As one author [H.G. Wells] put it: “For most people the voice of their neighbors is louder than the voice of God.” “What will people say?” is one of the first questions that many people are in the habit of asking. Jesus did not much care what others said about Him.

Jesus’ relatives were appalled at the risks that He was taking, risks which they thought no sensible person should take. And so they claimed that Jesus was “out of His mind.”

Here is another “scratch your head” item in this same Gospel. Jesus says: “Amen, I say to you, all sins and all blasphemies that people utter will be forgiven them. But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an everlasting sin.” What does Jesus, the Savior of the world, mean by that?

To understand what this frightening saying means we must first understand its circumstances. Jesus said this when the Scribes declared that the miraculous cures of driving out demons that He worked were done not by the power of God, but by the power of Satan.

1) The Holy Spirit enables people to recognize God’s truth: what is good and what is evil, what is right and what is wrong, what is true and what is false. If, as their chosen way of life, a person refuses the guidance of the Holy Spirit, they can grow incapable of recognizing God’s truth at all. For them evil can appear to be good, and good can appear to be evil. They can experience “the goodness of God” but see it and call it “the evil of Satan.”

2) Why should such a person have no forgiveness? Because repentance is the only condition necessary for forgiveness. A person, by repeated refusals of the Holy Spirit’s guidance, can lose the ability to recognize the difference between good and evil. Then, even when confronted by Jesus, they have no sense of their sin at all, so they cannot be repentant. And because they are not repentant, they cannot be forgiven. Final impenitence – in the last moments of life not being repentant – saying to God, “I did it my way and I am not one-bit sorry for anything at all” – is the sin against the Holy Spirit.

And there is one more “head scratcher” at the end of today’s Gospel. The crowd around Jesus told Him: “Your mother and your brothers and your sisters are outside asking for you.” But He said to them in reply: “Who are my mother and my brothers?” And looking around at those seated in the circle He said: “Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.”

Can you imagine how some of Jesus’ relatives might have misunderstood that statement and taken offense?

Jesus here lays down the conditions of true kinship. It can happen that people can feel closer to someone who is not a blood relative than they do to a family member.

It has been said that two people really become friends when they are able to say to each other, “Do you remember when?” And then to go on and talk about the things that they have come through together.

There is a story about an elderly woman who was informed by someone that an acquaintance of hers had died. And she showed no emotion. Puzzled, the person went on to say to her, “I just saw you two last week talking and laughing with each other.” “Yes,” she said. “I was friendly with her. I used to laugh with her. But to be real friends, you’ve got to weep together too.”

That is profoundly true. The basis for true kinship lies in shared experiences. And true Christians have the shared experiences of being “forgiven sinners” who have wept together in sorrow for their sins.

Diverse people can become friends with each other when they share the same Master, Jesus Christ, like the Apostles did. We become members of Our Lord’s own family when we truly love Jesus and, like Him, do the Heavenly Father’s will.

And, through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, as we strive to know and love Jesus as He truly is, we can move from scratching our heads to opening our minds and our hearts to welcome Him in.