

"Blessed and Broken: Called to Wholeness"

Homily of February 13, 2005

by Father Brian Joyce

Narrative Theology..... That's the fancy word scholars call some very famous passages in the Bible that are not really reports of actual historical events. But they are stories built to convey a truth. They are narratives constructed to make a point, carefully composed and put together to pass on a faithful and accurate understanding, and we believe an inspired understanding, of the basic meaning of life, or the meaning of history, or the meaning of the person of Jesus Christ.

We have two examples of narrative theology in today's Mass. One is the story of Adam and Eve and the serpent and the Garden of Eden, and the other is the story of Jesus in the desert being tempted by the devil. I mean where was the television crew and the court reporter in the Garden of Eden? Anyone got the answer to that? Or, where were the journalists and newspaper reporters when Jesus, we are told, was "all alone in the desert?" I mean, where are Peter Jennings and Dan Rather when you really need them?

As you probably already know, there are two quite different creation stories in the first three chapters of the Bible. The first one organizes the story of Creation into seven days, ending with man and woman made in the image and likeness of God, and God taking the last day off to rest with a sigh, "That's good.... That is very good." The second description of Creation is the one we heard read at this mass, and it all happens in a single twenty-four hour period, no seven days. It begins with this quote: "The Lord God formed us from the dust of the ground." And it ends with sin and fall and exile from the Garden of Eden. The first story speaks of "Original Blessing." God said, "You're good. You're very good." And the second story reports original sin. "You're broken from very early on. You're broken."

Then in today's second reading, St. Paul, in his letter to the Romans, tells us that the sad scene of sin and fall is all reversed and turned around completely in a new Adam, in the faithfulness and the overflowing grace of Jesus Christ. And the gospel story tells us how. The setting is different, not a lush garden, but a barren desert. The actors are similar. Jesus, just like Adam, sums up in Himself the whole human race. The tempter is the same, not a serpent this time, but the same old deceiver. The choice that is made is entirely different. Jesus makes His choice for God and for us, and not for His pleasure or His comfort, or His convenience, or His success, or His ambition, or His power. And this decision is not really made in theory or in abstract. It is not made in solitude. It is not made out in the desert. This choice by Jesus is made in the middle of His public life and ministry. He could have used His popularity to develop a political following. He chose to not do that. They wanted to make Him a king, and He chose deliberately to hide Himself. They asked for a miracle. They said, "Do a

sign” and He chose to refuse. The final bitter last invitation is “Come down from the cross. Come down and then we will believe you.” In every case, whatever the question, whatever the doubts, whatever the temptation, Jesus put God first. And that’s the true story of Jesus Christ.

So, what’s our story? We all have our own story. How would we tell the story of our lives? Not a bad place to begin is the Lenten theme of the parish here at Christ the King, on the cover of the bulletin. You might want to look at it. “Blessed, Broken, and Called to Wholeness.”

Blessed.... You know there is a saying that goes around, “You need to be born again.” It may have its significance, but I will tell you something. I was in a parking lot in Oakland on Tuesday, and the car next to me had a bumper sticker that read, “Born OK the First Time.” And that’s our Christian conviction, that we are made well by God who reads our hearts and says, “You’re good. You’re very good. You’re born OK the first time.” But we are also broken. All of us have fallen short by hurting, by resentments, by sins and failures. Our Church is broken, by betrayals, by discrimination, by failure of nerve in the face of the gospel. And our world is certainly broken by war and genocide, starvation of millions while millions of others fare very well, by the taking of life, of young and of old, for whatever reason, by oppression and injustice. We are blessed, but we are also broken.

But finally, we are also called to Wholeness. Now wholeness can take different shapes and forms, the form of forgiveness, the form of justice, the form of integrity, the form of nonviolence, the form of simple kindness. But we are all called to wholeness. In fact, there’s a good outline for Lent for us. What we might do is take not just one day of the week, but every day of the next forty days and spend just a little quiet time to list and name the blessings in our lives and how we are blessed, and then to list and name again the brokenness in our lives, where we are broken, where we failed, where we sinned, and then most of all, to list ways we can move toward greater wholeness. It might be forgiveness in our lives. It might be learning more about our faith, and stretching it. It might be outreach or service or integrity.

Let me just recommend two keys to wholeness, and they will sound familiar because I have talked about both of them before. One is compassion, and one is humor. Compassion allows for all kinds of healing and wholeness in our lives. It’s not feeling sorry for somebody. It is feeling along with other people. If we can, just for a moment, just for a moment glimpse things through someone else’s eyes. If, just for a moment, we could hurt with someone else’s feeling, maybe especially someone we disagree with or people we don’t think that highly of. If we can, just for a moment, walk in their shoes, or if we can, just for a moment, look at the world or maybe something that happened between us from their confused, complicated and slightly distorted point of view instead of looking at it from our confused, complicated, and slightly distorted point of view, then we can begin to find healing and wholeness. The first key is compassion.

The second key is humor and I have said this often before. I think humor is just the other side of faith. Humor is the nearest thing we have to belief. It shows up in our language when we talk about our belief to someone or our creed to someone or a joke we just told to someone, we say “Do you get

it?" or "Don't you get it?" It's the same language we use. They are so close. It's hard to imagine a humorless believer. I can imagine a well-behaved rule-keeper, but not a believer who has no sense of humor.

Humor is the other side of healing and forgiveness too. And our language shows that up because we say to somebody who doesn't have a sense of humor, or to somebody who is angry and won't let go of it, we say the same thing. We say, "Will you lighten up?..... Will you please lighten up?" It's hard to imagine someone who is good-humored about life and miserly about forgiveness. Forgiveness is close to humor and I think one of the reasons is, with both of them, we see the bad. We see something wrong. We see we've been hurt. We see things aren't right. But we also see the good, the larger picture. And we are able to smile. That's why we have so many good news/ bad news jokes. It's kind of saying, "I know things are wrong between us but let's look at it this way." Rodney Dangerfield told the story of going to his doctor, saying to his doctor, "Doctor, is something wrong with me? Every time I look at myself in the mirror I get a pain in my stomach and I want to throw up." And his doctor said, "Let's look at it this way: you have perfect vision."

About ten or fifteen years ago, a Cambridge professor wrote a book that the critics described as the "best current book on the Jewish Holocaust." And it was, of all things, a biography of the comedian Woody Allen. And in it, the author, referring to the Holocaust said, "After the death camps there are at least six million reasons not to laugh anymore and at least six million reasons to try to laugh again. No pit is so deep that our God is not deeper still. No wholeness or healing is so difficult that our God is not there first. No wound is so bad that our God does not invite us to healing from within.

So we have compassion and humor. We have faith and forgiveness and justice too. That's wholeness. God help us. Actually, God does help us. Amen.