

“That’s Chutzpah!”
Homily of February 5, 2006
by Fr. Brian Joyce

We have absolutely terrific readings for today’s Mass. They speak to us about when it seems that God is very far off, far away, and also when God is very near. They speak to us about when God seems to desert us and even betray us and also when God comes across as a helping, healing friend.

First there is Job. Did you hear some of the things Job said in that first reading? “I have been assigned months of misery and troubled nights have been allotted to me.” And here was the final line: “I shall not see happiness again.” ... And we all said, “Thanks be to God.” I don’t know what that is. I think the Yiddish speakers would say, “That’s chutzpah! If you say that, you’ve got chutzpah,or else you ain’t paying attention!”

In the Gospel, Jesus is enormously popular. “Everyone is looking for you!” You know, there is no question that Jesus was a healer and, as a matter of fact, the only form of healthcare available at this time. He was the only HMO in town. But, he goes into (It’s really we call him “Simon”, his first name, but...) Peter’s house. And he cures Peter’s mother-in-law. People sometimes ask, “Have priests ever been married? Can priests get married?” Well, St. Peter, the first Pope, was married. Now, the Bible never tells us he was married. But it tells us he had a mother-in-law. Now, as far as I know, the only way you get a mother-in-law is by getting married. Then every illness and those possessed by demons come to him.

“Demons,” we all have our demons. Devils, dark side, our bad days.... Father Dibble talks about “the buzzards” on our shoulders. So, let’s talk about demons. Jesus takes all the demons on, physical demons, social demons, cosmic demons. Physical demons: The one that comes to mind is leprosy. Social historians tell us that covered everything from acne to skin cancer. But it was people isolated and left out of the community that Jesus reached out to. And then he seems to do physical healing that has to do with relationship and communication, those who were blind, those who were deaf, those who could not speak. We have those demons. Don’t we? There are times when we don’t see, times when we don’t get it, times we don’t understand, times when we overlook, times when we are blind. We have those kinds of demons. The demon of deafness, times we don’t listen to each other. We don’t hear. We don’t hear the cry of the poor. And times when we don’t speak. We don’t speak up when we should or we don’t share when we should, or we don’t name the demons around us. We are afflicted with silence or with denial. Or we don’t speak the truth, when we have to be helped to get rid of silence and of being mute.

We need to work with Jesus to cast out our own demons. Not just physical demons, social demons. The demons Jesus dealt with in his day and age were first of all, legalism and fundamentalism. And we have more than enough of that going around even today. And he dealt with the demons of the ruling powers. For the days of Jesus, that was the Roman government and the religious leaders. And even today we have enough politicians and preachers, government leaders and prelates that we can speak of demons.

We need to work with Jesus to cast out our own demons. And cosmic demons! Jesus called for a redirection of the life of the human race, to redirect the life of this planet. And we have to ask the question, “Is our sense of direction” (I mean our values, our hopes, our wisdom.) “God-like or is it demonic?” We have to work with Jesus to cast out our own demons. Jesus is an example, in today’s Gospel, of God being near, of walking with us, being healing and helpful.

But now, let’s look at Job. A lot of people think of Job as the biggest loser in the Bible, number one loser. I don’t think so. It is just the opposite. Job doesn’t give up. He doesn’t give in. He doesn’t divorce himself from God. But he speaks up and he speaks the truth. The story of Job is a Hebrew story and poem composed about five hundred years before Christ. It is the longest piece of Hebrew poetry in existence. It’s not a historical report, but it’s a story. It’s a poem about what to think when bad things happen to good people. The drama begins with God calling a staff meeting, calling his cabinet. And among his cabinet members is someone called “Satan.” Now, in Hebrew “Satan” does not mean “devil.” You know what Satan is? Satan is the attorney, the prosecuting attorney or the district attorney. And God gets suckered into a crooked bet with Satan. They bet on this honorable man, whether he will remain faithful if things go bad. And God bets on Job to win and Satan bets on Job to lose. And then an avalanche of misfortunes and ills fall on Job. But Job’s faith holds out. He says, “We accept good things when they come from God. So we accept the hard things too.” Job loses all his possessions. He loses his children. He ends up sitting on the city dump. His wife says to him, “Will you just curse God and die?” And his friends come and they comfort him with all the religious clichés of the day. And he will have none of it. He tells them to get lost. He doesn’t lose faith, but he asks God, “Why?” And he gets from God a rude, it’s none of your business answer. You know, Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote that book, best seller, “When Bad Things Happen to Good People.” And in it, he says, “The right question to ask is never “Why?” The question to ask is “What can I do when things go bad? What can I do when disaster strikes?”

I mentioned the word earlier, but a quality dear to the Jewish heart is chutzpah. And it comes from Yiddish, and chutzpah is audacity or nerve or gall or guts. Job begins to see a bigger picture. He doesn’t deny God, but he says, “I’m not going to be a victim.” And he turns around and, in the story, he forgives God. He comes off looking better than God. That’s chutzpah! Now Jesus is similar, not when he is preaching, not when he is healing people, not when he is popular, not when everyone is looking for him, but when he is at his worst, when he is on the cross. He takes on God. He says, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” But he doesn’t let go. Until the very end, he says, “Into your hands, I commend my spirit.” At his worst moment, at the moment of death, that’s chutzpah!

The Job story is fiction. The story of Jesus is not. I'll share one other story with you, the Anne Frank story, which is a fact. The famous "Diary of Anne Frank" tells the story of this remarkable young girl and her ordeals under the Nazis during the Second World War. She is a Holocaust victim, and this bright-eyed, smiling youngster showed the world how to stay human in a completely inhuman situation. She died in the Belsen Death Camp just a few days before it was liberated. And we have the record of her last thoughts. They read, "In spite of everything, I still believe that people are good at heart." There in a death camp, "In spite of everything, I still believe that people are good at heart." That's chutzpah!

May we be willing to name the darkness and to keep the faith, to work at casting out our demons, and have a little chutzpah too. Amen.