

## 19 Sunday OT A – 10 August 2008

### LESSON: We Must Take Personal Responsibility for Our Faith

Chapters nine through eleven of St Paul's Letter to the Romans are a **theological thorn bush**.

In these chapters, St Paul deals with a problem that caused him personal **anguish** on an **emotional** level and throughout history has caused theologians countless **headaches** on an **intellectual** level.

He is facing the **mysterious question** of why the Jewish people as a whole did not **accept** Jesus as the Messiah.

- ✍ God had been patiently getting them ready for the Messiah's arrival for almost **2000** years, and yet when Jesus came, he caused **controversy and rejection** more than **joyful welcome**.
- ✍ Paul lists all the **privileges** that the Chosen People had received from God throughout the Old Testament, privileges **unique** to that nation.
- ✍ He calls to mind the unique **role** that God gave the People of Israel in the **history of salvation**, gradually preparing them to **give the world its Savior**.
- ✍ But then he spends the rest of these chapters **wrestling** with the mysterious reality that the nation as a whole did not **recognize and accept** the Messiah when he finally came.
- ✍ Many **individuals** did - St Paul is one of them, the Blessed Virgin Mary is another, the other Apostles did too - but not the whole community of Israelites **as a community**.
- ✍ Why not? Was God somehow **unfaithful** to his promises, did he **abandon** his Chosen People, couldn't he have **changed their hearts**?

In coming weeks, we will follow his **reflections and conclusions**, but today we can already see **one implication** of this mysterious reality:

- ✍ faith, the faith which puts us in a **right relationship** with God, is not something **automatic**.
- ✍ Rather, each one of us must take **personal responsibility** for it.
- ✍ Otherwise, we may **seem** to be close to God on the **outside**, while on the **inside** we may be **far away** from him.

### ILLUSTRATION: Elijah's Surprise Encounter

This is one of the most **memorable and beautiful** passages from the Old Testament.

- ✍ The Prophet **Elijah** has just had a **run-in** with the **pagan prophets** that have allied themselves with the **evil Queen Jezebel**.

- ✍ Elijah came out **victorious** in that encounter, and it made Jezebel **furious**.
- ✍ She threatened his life, so he **escaped** to Mt Horeb, in the **desert** of Palestine near the border with **Egypt**.

He came to that place for **two reasons**.

- ✍ First, he was looking for **new strength and guidance** in his efforts to save Israel from its current fall into **idolatry**.
- ✍ Second, Mt Horeb was where **Moses** had received the **Ten Commandments**, where God had **manifested** himself to his Chosen People after **liberating** them from slavery in Egypt, making his presence known by **fire, thunder, and frightening signs**.

So Elijah goes back to this **symbolic** place where the covenant had **begun** in order to beg God for help to **renew and protect** that covenant.

- ✍ He is probably expecting another **violent and dramatic manifestation** of God's presence.
- ✍ But when the **strong wind** comes, and the **earthquake**, and the **fire**, God is **not present** in them.
- ✍ Only when everything is **still and quiet** does Elijah **hear** the voice of God and **receive the guidance he needs**.

Dramatic or impressive **external signs** can sometimes help us **pay attention** to God's presence, but ultimately, our relationship with him must go **deeper**.

It must be developed by the **quiet, intimate encounter** of conversing with him **heart to heart**.

Unless we have a **relationship like that** with him, we may end up **missing** his **most important actions** in our lives, just as the Jewish nation at the time of Christ missed the coming of the Messiah.

## **APPLICATION: Heeding God's Call**

It is possible that God is calling **some of us** here today to a **special level of intimacy** with him, to a **special vocation** in the Church.

- ✍ As he did with Elijah in the First Reading, and with St Paul himself, God calls certain individuals to be **spiritual warriors** whose **prayer, testimony, and spiritual service** constantly protect and renew the covenant God has made with his new Chosen People, the Church.
- ✍ They are the consecrated lay people, nuns, monks, missionaries, priests - **visible signs and reminders** to the rest of us, and to the entire **world**, of God's **personal interest** in **each one** of us, of his **untiring activity** in history.

- ✍ If you have heard God **calling** you in this way, **don't wait. Don't doubt.** Go and **visit** a religious community or seminary, come and **speak** to a vocation director.
- ✍ We **need you** to say **yes** to God's call; if you are **generous with him**, he will be **generous with you**.
- ✍ And if you **know someone** who God may be calling, **pray** for them, **encourage** them, **support** them.

And for those **parents** whose **children** experience the call - you must **never discourage** it.

- ✍ It may well be a **sacrifice** for you, especially if he calls them at a **young age**, but remember, your children are **not your own**.
- ✍ They are **on loan** to you from God.
- ✍ They are **God's children first and foremost**, and if he calls your son or daughter to follow him more closely, he himself will **take their place** in the family, because he is faithful.

As for the **rest** of us, even if we **aren't** called to a **vocation** of prayer and spiritual service, we are still called to **pray and to serve** and work to **rejuvenate** and **deepen** this **personal relationship** with Christ that is so important for our growth into **mature, wise** and **joyful** Christians. Here's how we can do that...

## **APPLICATION: Finding Times of Silence**

Each one of us needs to follow the example of **Elijah** in the First Reading, and the example of **Jesus himself** in the Gospel.

We need to **go up to the mountain**, leaving behind the **hustle and bustle** of our busy lives, in order to **spend time alone with God**, to be able to hear the "**tiny whispering sound**" of his voice, to renew our strength, to find out what he wants to say to us.

There are many ways we can do this, but here are **three ideas**:

First, every Catholic should go on a **yearly spiritual retreat**, even if only for **one weekend** a year, even if only for **one day** a year, to spend some quality time with the Lord, one-on-one.

- ✍ There are monasteries only a few hours drive from here where you might be able to go away for a weekend – spend time in prayer with God. There's Mount Saviour in Elmyra, New York (where I go each year for retreat) which **welcomes** weekend and week-long guests to their monastery for prayer and reflection.
- ✍ There's the men's retreat which happens every year and which has been advertized in the bulletin for weeks – an opportunity just for the men of the parish to go and grow in the Lord.
- ✍ There are Cursillo weekends offered regularly – opportunities to go for 4 days to grow in knowledge of the faith and in love for the Lord

- ✍ There is the Jesuit house in Wernersville (outside Reading) which offers regular retreats and opportunities for growth and renewal.
- ✍ I've placed several links to retreat centers and monasteries and information about Cursillo on the parish website – check it out!

So, that's one way to grow in the Lord and hear the Lord's quiet whisper – go on retreat and to make sure that every Catholic takes a retreat every single year.

Secondly, we each need to spend time in personal prayer **every day**.

- ✍ We easily find **ten minutes** for so many things - why is it so hard to find ten minutes in the morning and the evening to spend **exclusively** with the Lord?
- ✍ In fact, we have **no problem** wasting 2 hours watching a movie, or 4 hours surfing the web, but we can't find 10 minutes to pray?!
- ✍ The very fact that it is **so hard** to find this time is **proof** that we really **need** it.
- ✍ Prayer is SO important, and we've tried to provide many different means for prayer and styles of prayer – thought things in our pamphlet racks and links on the parish website.
- ✍ Most importantly, a **privileged moment** of intimate, **personal** contact with our Lord happens every Sunday at **Holy Communion**, when we have those precious moments of **silence** to speak **heart-to-heart** with the one who loves us and gives himself to us.
- ✍ The sacred space of this church is like Mt Horeb - set aside for **personal encounters** with God.
- ✍ And so we should always treat it with **great respect**.
  - Which is why we encourage everyone to maintain a prayerful silence in church both before and after Mass (using the new narthex or social hall to talk – allowing others to pray in church in peace and quiet).

If we don't take time to **cultivate our personal relationship with Christ**, chances are we will be swept away by the **fire and the earthquake**, and miss out on the **wonderful plans** God has for our lives.

So, as we gather here on our own Mount Horeb, in this (newly consecrated) church, let's take the opportunity during this Mass, and during **every** Mass, to **listen closely** to the still, small voice of the Lord in our hearts, and, just like Elijah, to **open our hearts** to him, so that he can **open his heart** to us.