

6<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – C (February 14, 2010)

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One thing that Jesus did over and over again in his public life and ministry is: he overturned people's expectations. They thought he would or ought to say or do one thing, but more often than not he would say or do just the opposite. God's chosen people were waiting for a Savior who would come in earthly power and glory; instead, Jesus was born in a stable to a poor family. They thought Jesus should relate only to those they thought to be decent and respectable; instead, Jesus reached out to prostitutes, tax collectors and other notorious sinners. They thought Jesus' death on the cross was the end of his story; instead, he truly and literally rose from the dead three days later. Over and over again, Jesus turned expectations upside down.

The gospel today gives us another example of this process in action. Jesus' teaching here is often referred to as the Sermon on the Plain—compared to the Sermon on the Mount that we find in Matthew's gospel. The Beatitudes that Luke gives us today are fewer in number than the more familiar version we read in Matthew, but they pack a special punch nonetheless. Back in that first century, it was generally thought and expected that worldly wealth and comfort were sure-fire signs of being specially loved and favored by God. But what does Jesus say? "Blessed are you who are poor...who are now hungry...who are now weeping...when people hate you and when they exclude and insult you."

Talk about turning expectations completely upside down! And yet Jesus means precisely what he says. Those who are lacking what the world thinks most important or most advantageous are truly blessed, Jesus says; they know more deeply than anyone else their utter dependence on God. And this leads to yet another surprise, another overturned expectation. The world tells us that we are responsible only to ourselves, that we can determine our own rules, and that to follow some silly old rules from any God or Church makes us nothing but mind-numbed slaves. And yet...it is amazing to see over and over again how those who come to know their own powerlessness and who turn to God for help, grace and direction discover a joy and a freedom that they never knew before—precisely the opposite of slavery! What did Jesus say? "Rejoice and leap for joy on that day! Behold, your reward will be great in heaven." And that joy can be known in some elementary (and yet profound) ways even in this earthly life.

Actually, our 21<sup>st</sup>-century world isn't all that different from what Jesus faced in the first century—at least in terms of what the world and culture considers important. We continue to be told that we ought to pursue our own material and other self-centered desires; in this view, the three most important people in the world are me, myself and I. And God? Jesus? The Church? Strictly for wimps, weaklings and nerds. And lest you think I'm exaggerating here, consider the remarks made several years ago by Ted Turner (of CNN fame): in a newspaper interview, he said that "Christianity is a religion for losers." Tom Cruise, the famous actor, talked in an interview how he was raised Catholic but then embraced Scientology. He decided that he didn't like the fact that Catholics and other Christians (in his words) "always have to follow somebody else's rules. In Scientology, we make our own." If religion is all about getting our own way, then that makes sense. God, the One who created us and redeemed us in his Son Jesus Christ, has something else in mind for us, to put it mildly. Please pray for Mr. Turner, Mr. Cruise, and others who think like them.

In this cultural context, in the midst of this world view, it can be tough to go against those expectations and to not fear living and being known as a disciple of Jesus Christ. And yet it not only can happen, but it does happen all the time—just like it should. Jesus turned the worldly expectations of his time upside down, and his grace and his Holy Spirit give us the power to do the same...if we desire and avail ourselves of that grace.

Let me offer two contemporary examples. A few weeks ago Deacon Larsen spoke eloquently of his experience last fall at NCYC—the National Catholic Youth Conference in Kansas City—and in being part of a crowd of over 20,000 young people from all over the country who were praising God, loving Jesus, and celebrating their Catholic faith. A few days ago I read a recent issue of the Columbus High School newspaper in which some of the students who went to NCYC shared their impressions. I have to tell you: I was deeply moved by what I read from all of them. One student's experience led to this comment: "I realized I don't give God enough credit—I depend on myself for things I can't do alone. We all need God in our lives." She nailed it—right on target.

Another student had this to say: "I didn't know what to expect going into NCYC...I couldn't understand what could possibly be so great about being with 'god freaks' all weekend worshipping God? So I went into it with an open mind, and got more than I could have asked out of it. The first day back [at school] I heard so many jokes made about God toward all of us. Do you realize what you're really doing? You're not even offending us. We knew going into this that would happen. You're offending God, someone who died just for YOU, and all you can do is make fun of others who believe in him...NCYC was not some brainwashing way to get kids to become different. It's simply an event created to strengthen your relationship with God, figuring out why you were put on this planet, and understanding who you want to be as a person." This student also nailed it—she was right on target as well. And keep in mind: these and the other student writers shared their thoughts, they witnessed to their faith in Jesus to their fellow high school students in a very public way. They knew they risked being mocked as "God freaks" by their classmates and schoolmates, but they witnessed to their faith nonetheless. Could you have done that? Would you? It's called the Holy Spirit's gift of fortitude and courage—the most amazing grace of God.

The other example is related to something on TV this past week. Last Tuesday afternoon I watched Oprah for the first time in my life. I mean no offense to the Queen of Daytime Television, but I've never before had the slightest inclination to tune her in...until Tuesday. Last weekend I learned that some members of the Dominican Sisters of Mary, Mother of the Eucharist (from Ann Arbor, Michigan) would be on her show. This is the religious order to which my niece Annie belongs (my brother's older daughter); her religious name is Sr. Maria Caritas. I was fascinated to see how someone like Oprah Winfrey, one of the wealthiest, most highly-respected and well-known celebrities in the world, would react to a group of religious sisters (most of whom are in their 20's and 30's) dressed in full habit and who freely take vows of chastity, poverty and obedience. I have to admit that I also hoped I would my see my niece of national TV; what can I say—I'm one very proud uncle!

Well, I didn't see my niece, sad to say. But that was the only downside of the show—it was a joy to see these young women, full of life and faith and Spirit, witnessing to their faith in Jesus Christ and their desire to serve him and his Church in this particular vocation. I must say that Oprah was very respectful toward the good Sisters; she seemed sincerely interested in their way of life. It was obvious that she didn't know much about consecrated life; that's not a criticism—Oprah admitted her lack of knowledge quite openly. For their part, the sisters spoke of how they each experienced God's personal call to embrace the religious life. Many had come from other careers and had had much material success. One spoke of her former career as a pharmacist; another had been the chief financial officer for three car dealerships in New York. Even with their worldly success, however, they sensed an emptiness and a restlessness, thinking that they were being called to something more life-giving and self-giving. They heard an interior call from God—not necessarily an audible voice, to embrace this life. They found what were looking for in this community—and the joy and peace on their faces and in their manner demonstrated that beyond question.

Oprah was especially interested in the fact that these sisters promise to remain unmarried and therefore will not have their own children. Some of the sisters spoke of how they had dated in their younger years and did in fact look forward to marriage. But then they began to sense that call from God and realized

that his grace would enable them to live up to the promises that would be expected of them. One of the sisters said that her former boyfriend will be ordained to the priesthood in the near future. Never underestimate the surprising power of God! Another sister spoke of how she is in a spiritual sense “married” to Christ, devoting herself entirely to her Savior and to doing his will for her. She also spoke of the challenge of espousing herself to Jesus in this way—she said that if there is ever a problem in her relationship with Jesus, she knows whose fault it is...and it’s not Jesus’!

The point is: these sisters were willing to come on national TV in a very public forum, not hiding in any way who or what they are, and wanting above all to share their love for Jesus Christ and their love for his Church as well. They were willing to overturn the expectation many have these days that one’s faith and love for Christ is purely a private thing and shouldn’t be spoken of in the public square. We don’t all have the specific call or vocation that these sisters have, but we do all share the call to faith, discipleship, and love and dedication to the truth of the gospel. Are we willing to be that salt of the earth and light of the world? Can we, dare we refuse to conform to the expectations of our culture that we keep our life and faith in Jesus locked up tight in a box in a corner of the closet? Lent begins this coming Wednesday (check the bulletin for the Mass schedule for Ash Wednesday)—perhaps an especially good time to unlock that box and overturn some expectations...especially those we may impose on ourselves??