

29th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle C
October 17, 2010

Readings: Exodus 17:8-13; 2 Timothy 3:14-4:2; Luke 18:1-8

Two Dimensions of Faith

Today's readings bring us a message about persevering in faith. And any of you who are true fans of the Detroit Lions can understand a little bit about this concept. They finally won their first game of the season last week, and this weekend they once again try to stop their road losing streak. It's currently at 23—they haven't won an away game since October 28, 2007.

As I was working in the yard last week listening to the Lion's game on the radio, I reflected on our first reading about the Israelites going into battle against the Amalekites. I imagined some fan in the crowd holding his arms up in prayer over the gridiron trying to bring God's blessing upon the team much as Moses did over the battlefield. In faith, Moses held the staff of God and as long as he held his arms up in faith, his troops prevailed. But when his arms tired, the Amalekites got the better of the fighting. It made me wonder if Joshua and his troops had one eye on the battle and one eye looking up at Moses to check the position of his arms. It would be disconcerting to initiate a charge against the enemy only to see Moses' arms start to droop.

Moses had faith in God's power and so did Aaron and Hur who helped him hold up his arms. It's a good reminder that while our priests have special powers to give us blessings, they still need our help. They need us to persevere in faith and to carry out our roles in the Church. We all need to work together as we go into battle each day against evil in our world.

And when we talk about faith, there are two separate aspects. The first is faith as an action in the sense that we believe and trust in God's power and love. The second is faith as an object; it is what we believe; the facts about our relationship with God and how He wants us to behave.

Jesus gives us a good parable in the gospel today which illustrates the first aspect of faith. Just as the widow was persistent in her pleas to the judge to rule justly, we can have faith that if we are persistent in our prayer for a good and just cause, that God will answer our prayers. We have to have faith in God and realize, however, that He may answer our prayers in ways we cannot understand; that we cannot always understand God's will and the big picture of how He may use our temporary sufferings to bring about a greater good.

One of the most common prayer petitions that I hear is for the return of family members, especially children, to the faith and to the Church. And these prayers are greater than those for physical healings because the consequences can be eternal. St. Monica gave us a wonderful example of her persistence in prayer for her son Augustine. Augustine was caught up in chasing after and promoting heresies. He lived a life of promiscuity and fathered an illegitimate child. When Monica tried to follow him, he deceived her and snuck away in the night. But God finally answered her prayers and Augustine became one of the greatest saints and a very important figure in the history of the Church. Pray for your loved ones who have left the faith. These prayers are among the most important requests we can make of God because they have eternal consequences. Have faith that God will answer your prayers and do not be afraid to be persistent.

But we hear this morning not only about having faith we also hear about how we learn and know the content of our faith, what it is we should believe. There are three sources for our faith knowledge: Scripture, the teaching authority of the Church called the Magisterium, and Sacred Tradition. And we hear about all three sources this morning.

In our second reading St. Paul tells us: ***“All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for refutation, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that one who belongs to God may be competent, equipped for every good work.”*** Scripture is one of the most important sources for our faith knowledge. It allows us to hear God’s own Word. But we must not allow ourselves to fall into the trap that Protestants do when they try to imply that *only* Scripture is useful for teaching. They want to ignore Tradition and the teaching authority of the Church because it is inconvenient and may interfere with what they want to believe. But Scripture never tells us to do this. St. Peter tells us in Scripture: ***“As our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, also wrote to you, speaking of these things as he does in all his letters. In them there are some things hard to understand.”*** (2 Peter 3:15-16) Scriptures can indeed be difficult to understand. We need other sources to help us interpret Scripture correctly. Because they do not rely on other sources, Protestants, starting with the same Bible, are now broken into literally thousands of denominations.

Additionally, the fact that the Bible exists at all required the intervention of some outside authority. There were many letters and gospels written at the time of the early Church and it was only after 300 years that the Church, inspired by the Holy Spirit, decided which ones should be included in the Bible. That is why we do not hear readings at Mass from the Gospel of Thomas or from St. Clement’s letter to the Corinthians. The Bible didn’t give us the Church; the Church gave us the Bible. The authority of the Church existed before the New Testament Scriptures were even written and compiled.

That authority began when Jesus appointed Peter to be the Rock on which the Church was to be founded. Peter’s role, and that of our popes, his successors, was analogous to that of Moses in the Old Testament who was that agent between God and His people. In our first reading, when Moses sent the men into battle telling them they would be protected as he held up the staff of God, the soldiers didn’t question his authority. They knew it was God-given.

So we have Scripture and the authority of the Church, the Magisterium, as two sources of faith knowledge. St. Paul also talks about the third source in our second reading. He says: ***“Remain faithful to what you have learned and believed, because you know from whom you learned it.”*** Much of what we know about our faith we know by what was recorded in non-scriptural sources about the actions of the apostles and what they passed along orally to the early Church, our Sacred Tradition. Scripture itself, in St. Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians, states that ***“Therefore, brothers, stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught, either by an oral statement or by a letter of ours.”*** (2 Thess. 2:15) Our Church gives us many tools to know what we should believe and how we should act.

After the parable of the widow, our gospel today closes with a question from Jesus. He leaves us to ponder: ***“When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”*** We are challenged today to have faith, to know our faith, and to share that faith with others. Jesus will come again on the last day in glory, but He will also come for each one of us personally on our *own* last day and will examine our faith. It will be important that we are prepared; that we be persons who witnesses to our faith.

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