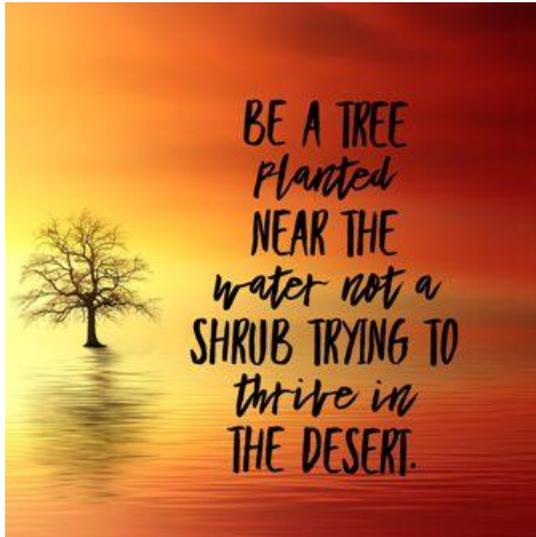


Homily for Sunday, Feb. 13, 2022 – Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time



Let's face it, when things go well, faith is not difficult. On top of that, when things go well, there's no drive to develop our faith any further. After all, if things are going well, I must be the reason for my own success. Here's a little story that illustrates what I'm talking about. It centers on a Jewish grandmother, but remember this Jewish grandmother lives in every one of us.

There was this Jewish woman raised in the liberal leftist tradition who was part of a socialist movement in her youth. She wasn't a practicing Jew; in fact, she was more an atheist.

Well, one day she takes her grandson to the beach. He is her favorite. She buys him a little yellow sun hat, a swimsuit, a sand pail and shovel. As he plays in the sand, she falls asleep in her beach chair. The little boy wanders out into the surf and is caught up in an undertow. The boy begins screaming as he's being pulled out to sea. The woman wakes up and yells, "Save my child," only to see that the sun is setting and everyone else on the beach has gone home.

Atheist or not, she starts screaming to high heaven, "Please, God, save my child! Creator of the Universe, blest be Thou, I promise that if you save my grandchild, like Abraham, I will go to the synagogue every Saturday. I will eat only Kosher food. I'll do anything! Just save my grandchild." Sure enough, the child is tossed safely up on the shore. She runs down, bends over the child and sees that he is breathing. Then she frowns, and pointing a finger up to heaven she demands, "He had a hat!"

Like I said: when things are going well, faith is not difficult. This story teaches us that. This story also teaches us that faith can easily be taken for granted and downright neglected. After all, when everyone is getting along in the family, when work is fulfilling, when there's money in the bank, and when my health is great, why turn to the Lord? Who needs God at that point? But when a crisis hits, we're quickly on our knees asking for favors. It's certainly true in my life, and I remember how after the attack of 9-11, Americans were turning to God in prayer and returning to church and synagogue in droves. It lasted about three months after which God was pretty much relegated to the back burner as before. That tragedy taught me how difficult it is to develop a trusting relationship with God in the middle of a crisis especially when that relationship wasn't already established before the crisis. Or, to put in Jesus' words, "Learn to walk while you still have the light."

Jeremiah in that first reading said, ***“Cursed is the one who trusts in mere mortals...whose heart turns away from the Lord...but blessed is the one who does trust in the Lord.”*** Jeremiah, and later Jesus, used a metaphor everyone could relate to—a shrub. If we trust in the Lord, Jeremiah says we are like a plant that has continual access to water. Even when a drought comes, when a crisis in life hits, we will not panic, or wither, or die. We will come through—a little scarred, a little bruise, but also a little wiser and a little stronger. Why? Because we will have learned, long before our game fell apart, how to call not only on the abundance of God but, more importantly, on the God of abundance.

When Jeremiah spoke these words about the withering shrub and the fruitful shrub, his words were directed to his own king, King Zedekiah. Zedekiah was the king of Judah and a weak king at that. When the Babylonians were threatening to invade Judah, King Zedekiah chose to ignore the prophet Jeremiah who advised Zedekiah to place his trust in God. Zedekiah, instead, put his trust in Egypt’s armies to rescue him. Disaster followed. The Babylonians invaded and carried the Jews off to exile. Judah, without God in its life, was like a shrub in the desert about to wither and die. When they finally learned to turn to God, and not simply to mere mortals, God did not hold them to their sin but blessed them and allowed them to return to their home, Judah.

Similarly, Paul is encouraging faith in the Corinthians. Paul’s strategy is to plant the seeds of the Christian faith in communities. Then he appoints elders to continue the work as he moves on to another community to plant more seeds. However, there’s trouble in Corinth, so he writes them a letter reminding them of what he told them while he was still with them in person.

Apparently, many of the Corinthians did not believe in the resurrection of the body. They felt the idea of a risen body was unsuited to an intellectual faith. After all, when was the last time any of us saw a body rising out of a coffin or a grave? Others, in Corinth, influenced by Greek philosophy, could not believe in the resurrection of the body either. Greek philosophy had taught them that death merely freed the soul from the shackles of the body. The body was purely a prison from which the spirit longed to be released. Paul basically told them that if they rejected the notion of their own resurrection, they were in effect denying the resurrection of Jesus. Christ’s life, death, and resurrection is the very means by which God has broken the power of sin and death. To admit there’s no resurrection, is to admit sin, evil and death continue to reign supreme. If that’s the case, then faith is futile and hope is in vain.

Instead, Paul invites the Corinthians to go beyond Greek philosophy because, as good as it is, it’s too limiting and not worthy of who you are. Go beyond philosophy and move into the world of faith. Instead of using an example from the world of philosophy, Paul

borrowed from Jeremiah and Jesus and uses an example they could relate to. He said Jesus has been raised from the dead and is the first fruit of all who have fallen asleep. For the Jews, the first fruit was the first portion of the harvest or the first lambs born in the spring. First, not last and not leftovers, was what you offered to God. You brought the first sheaves of wheat, the first fruits and vegetables, the first lambs born and offered them to God at the Temple. If you were willing to offer God your first, and not hoard it for yourself, God would bless the rest of your crops and the rest of your animals. What God finds favorable in the first, God finds favorable in everything that follows. Jesus is the first fruit, the acceptable offering to God. What God does to the first fruit God does to the rest of the crop. God raises Jesus, bodily, so God will raise us to new life as well. We believe in the resurrection of the body. The body is sacred and should be treated that way, not just yours but everyone's. What a resurrected body looks like, I'm not sure. What I do know is that it's sacred and will be raised in glory.

Do we really believe everybody is sacred and carries the image and likeness within them? In the gospel, Jesus has just spent the night in prayer on top of a mountain. He heard some truth in prayer from God and is eager to tell the multitude of people gathered on the level place, at the foot of the mountain, what he heard. What he heard and what he tells us is that when we are poor, when we are hungering, when we are weeping, and when we are persecuted, we are blessed in the eyes of God. Nothing can take that blessedness away from you, for you are, in the words of Jeremiah, the shrub planted by water and you will bear abundant fruit. You are, in the words of Paul, connected to Jesus. And what happens to Jesus, the first fruit, will happen to you. He was ultimately raised to new life and so will you. Until that day comes, let us learn to walk while we still have the light.

Fr. Phil