

5th Sunday of the Year – Cycle B – 2009

Job 7:1-4,6-7; 1 Corinthians 9:16-19,22-23; Mark 1:29-39

Job had been living the good life. He had a wife and children, a good home, good health, many possessions and the promise of a comfortable existence for many years to come. Then everything began to fall apart. One by one these things were taken away from him and he was left with nothing. Plunged into the depths of despair we hear the words of his lament at his present state of existence and of his former life.

It simply didn't make sense because Job was a "*blameless and upright man . . . who feared God and avoided evil*" (Job 1:1). Because of this God had blessed him with a wife, ten children, and thousands of sheep, camels, oxen and other work animals. Job, overwhelmed by this massive loss, simply could not understand why all of this evil had befallen him. And in this state of overwhelming loss he is thrust into the pit of despair.

This image is put side by side with today's Gospel passage in which we see Jesus resting and praying the morning after he had a an overwhelming day of extraordinarily hard work. This rest and prayer enabled him to continue his ministry another day, and yet another, until he had made his way throughout all of Galilee. Jesus could have been overwhelmed by the state of all the human suffering he encountered. The illness and the poverty he experienced were staggering. As a man, he could have done so little. But as God, he could do all things, to make a difference in their lives.

This is an important model for those of us who call ourselves Christian. Work is an essentially important part of what it means to be Christian. Work, in and of itself, is a good thing. As Pope John Paul said in his letter *Laborem Exercens*, On human labor, "*Work is a good thing for man – a good thing for his humanity – because through work man not only transforms nature, adapting it to his own needs, but he also achieves fulfillment as a human being and indeed, in a sense becomes 'more a human being'*" (LE 9).

But work, without the proper focus, can mislead us into thinking that our works are something we accomplish on our own. We then become the end and purpose of our work and as a consequence our work can become drudgery. Also, a misguided notion of work can lead us to focus our minds on our own achievements, and we can begin to become prideful; "*look at what I did.*" We can develop an attitude of entitlement; "*I have worked for what I have and so I deserve these things.*" We also can tend to depend too much on ourselves and on the things we have accumulated as a measure of our work. This can lead us to trust more in ourselves and our possessions than in God, and we then can forget that all that we are and all that we have comes from God.

The problems with these misdirected attitudes are many. First, and foremost, you are not God; I am not God. God made us and gave us life and everything that we have in this life. Even those things we have achieved through the sweat of our brow are simply ways in which God has worked through us. Secondly, we humans are finite, and therefore, left to ourselves, we can only deal with issues within the limits of our own abilities and resources.

This misguided focus on work, coupled with corruption, rampant materialism and greed, has resulted in the economic crisis in which we currently find our world. This past year we have seen devastating financial losses in virtually all sectors of the economy. These losses are far from over as the extraordinary financial losses of major corporations begin to filter down to us. The economic stimulus package and the multi-trillion dollar bailouts are only a human way of trying to prevent the problem from getting worse. The mistake of thinking these things will solve the problem is that financial resources are a finite commodity. Today's economic problems are much greater than any amount of money alone can solve. Throwing money at the economic problem is simply putting a band-aid on the mortal wound of our economy.

In order for this economy to turn around it is going to take a lot more than stimulus packages and bailouts. To turn around this economy will require a conversion of hearts of all people who are responsible for this situation. That means everyone, even you and me. We need to ask ourselves, "How did things get so bad?" One thought was given us by the great spiritual leader Mahatma Gandhi in his list of the Seven Deadly Social Sins: *"politics without principle, wealth without work, commerce without morality, pleasure without conscience, education without character, science without humanity, and worship without sacrifice."*¹

If we are really going to be honest with ourselves we need to admit that these "Social Sins" are at the root of all problems we have in society, and therefore they are at the root of the present economic problem. So, how do we begin to change our economic situation? We need to work to reform our society as a whole, starting with our own hearts. We need to be honest with ourselves asking how my own personal lifestyle, driven by the values of this world, has contributed to the current crisis. And how do we begin to be honest with ourselves? First of all by reminding ourselves that we are not God and that we need God at the center of our lives. And how do we do this? How do we put God back at the center? Through the model that God established from the beginning, a model that Jesus gave to us in his life.

Today's gospel passage comes towards the end of the first chapter of Mark. Jesus had just begun his preaching ministry, he had called the disciples, taught in the synagogue, cast out demons, healed Simon's mother-in-law and even after sunset continued the work of casting out demons and curing the diseases of everyone who came to him. All of this in only 20 verses in Mark's Gospel. In other words, Jesus was working hard. And then he did something they didn't expect, something so unusual that he caught the disciples off guard for they did not know where he was. He rose up *"... very early before dawn, (and) left and went off to a deserted place, where he prayed"* (Mark 1:35).

Prayer, time spent with God, helped Jesus to stay focused on his mission. Likewise, prayer is essential for us to keep the right focus in our work and in our lives. Prayer helps us to ask the right questions. Prayer can also clarify for us whether we are making wrong choices that are harming us and the lives of others. Prayer then gives the grace to change our ways and let go of the things that are unnecessary and focus instead on those things that are of God. Prayer then moves us away from ourselves and our own wants and needs. It moves us beyond our own self-centeredness and helps us to look to the needs of others providing whatever care and support we can give to them. Prayer helps us to once again place our dependence on God for all we have and all we are.

This requires time set aside weekly, and even daily to focus on God. This is why God gave us the Sabbath rest and the Sunday obligation to worship God. This gives us an opportunity to ask for guidance and direction in our work. This gives us the opportunity to ask God, “What do you want me to do today?”

So today, in this Eucharist, let us ask for the grace to honestly order our hearts towards God's will. Let us ask for the grace to be kept from the despair of the limitations of earth, and instead focus our hearts and our minds on the things of heaven.

¹ From Sojourners “Davos: How will this Crisis Change Us? (February 2009).