

## EIGHTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR--Year A

There are all sorts of ways in which passages from Scripture challenge us. Sometimes it's mainly a matter of wondering what is even meant. On a recent weekday, we heard Jesus saying in Mark's Gospel, "Have salt in yourselves and you will be at peace with one another." Commentators are by no means in agreement what it even means to say, "Have salt in yourselves." We just don't know the original context of that saying.

Today's Gospel presents a different kind of challenge. We may well relish the beautiful image of a meadow full of colorful wildflowers, the traditional "lilies of the field." For me, it brings back wonderful memories of once coming upon a huge field of blue lupine in the distance, at first so far away that I thought it was a shimmering mountain lake. Only when I got closer was it clear that it was a field of these magnificent flowers gently swaying in the breeze. But relishing Jesus' imagery is one thing; what to make of his teaching is another. For those of us who live reasonably comfortable lives, confident that there will be a roof over our heads tonight, that the furnace will almost certainly be working, and that there is plenty of food available in the fridge or freezer, it may not be difficult to combine that kind of confidence with a conviction that God does indeed love us and that we can trust God even more than we can trust the various pieces of machinery in our house or apartment. But we are also aware--all too much aware--of how other people have been undergoing very different experiences. In recent days, weeks, and months we have seen terrible photos in the paper or on TV of people undergoing almost unimaginable hardship and suffering: refugees fleeing Syria with hardly anything more than the clothes on their backs; militias slaughtering people in the Central African Republic just because the others belong to a different religion; mothers grieving their grown sons killed in the fighting in Venezuela. Even in our own relatively well-off country, dozens of people have frozen to death

this winter in the upper Midwest. The list seems endless. What would it mean for persons suffering such things to be told they need not worry about what they are to eat or drink or wear when, for example, they may have already gone for days with little or nothing to eat and may have no clothes except what they are wearing, and that these may be in tatters?

The only way to reconcile such harsh facts with Jesus' teaching about the birds of the air and the lilies of the field is to recognize that no single Bible verse or passage ought be read entirely on its own, without reference to other significant parts of Scripture. If we keep in mind Jesus' own example in the garden of Gethsemani, it is clear that he himself was at times anxious as he prayed fervently that the looming cup of suffering be taken away from him. But the really crucial point of that account is that he immediately added, "Yet not my will but yours be done." This is what it means, in terms of today's Gospel, to "seek *first* the kingdom of God." It doesn't mean not caring at all for other concerns, whether it be matters of food, clothing, or threats to one's very life or the lives of those whom we love. Those Venezuelan mothers were altogether right to grieve their slain children, and we are altogether right when we do what we can to come to the aid of the homeless or of victims of crime or of natural disasters, whether these be persons in our own city or typhoon victims halfway around the world in the Philippines.

With regard to those who suffered so much from Typhoon Haiyan last November, it was inspiring for me to read the other day some words by Archbishop Joseph Kurtz of my hometown of Louisville. As the current head of the U.S. bishops conference, he recently traveled to the Philippines to survey the work of Catholic Relief Services and other charitable organizations. Here is part of what he wrote:

People in the United States and around the world who have given to typhoon relief efforts don't get to see the good that their generosity promotes. It was humbling to feel the gratitude of the Filipino people and to see the warmth and emotion in their faces as they greeted us. CRS works with partner Caritas organizations from around the world, and the local church takes the lead in terms of discerning needs and responding. Together they work on a scale that makes a crucial difference in the lives of individuals and communities.

Four million people were displaced by the typhoon, and CRS has helped repair or build 20,000 shelters. They've brought clean water and sanitation services to thousands of displaced people. Farmers and others left jobless by the storm are able to support their families through livelihood recovery programs, clearing debris, planting crops and building homes. Catholics in the United States should know their generosity enables essential work of the Gospel, serving those in need without any thought of repayment.<sup>1</sup>

It is good to hear such words as we prepare to enter the season of Lent, a time when we normally are more generous in giving aid to others than at other times of the year. Our Gospel reading concluded with the words, "Sufficient for the day is its own evil." Everyone can surely understand and agree with that. May we do whatever we can to alleviate the evils of which we are aware each day.

1" Archbishop Joseph E. Kurtz, "What I Learned in the Philippines," *Catholic News USA*, Feb. 28, 2014.  
[www.cathnewsusa.com](http://www.cathnewsusa.com) (accessed March 1, 2014).