

26nd Sunday; Cycle A

(Ezek 18:25-28; Phil 2:1-11; Matt 21:28-32)

I always draw my homilies from the lectionary readings for the day, but for some reason I found today's readings difficult. I was pondering hard on them, so perhaps it's not surprising that I had a dream last night. In the dream I was hard-working, prudent, industrious, and frugal. I had worked steadily, saved carefully, invested wisely. As a result I had very substantial assets for a comfortable retirement. Then one day I decided to be a little frivolous. I went to Las Vegas for some gambling. I lost--not a huge amount--under \$1,000. I had used up all my pocket money so I went to the bank to draw some out. But the teller told me, "I'm sorry, sir, but there's nothing in your account; it's exhausted." I said, "That's impossible; I had several hundred thousand in it!" He said, "Yes, sir, but you see you turned from being prudent to being frivolous, so now it's all gone. Sorry, sir, but that's the way it works." I screamed, "That's so unfair!" My screaming woke me up, and I heard a voice saying, "It's a parable."

When I looked at today's first reading the significance of the dream struck me. Ezekiel's contemporaries were accusing the Lord of unfairness; they were saying, in effect, that if a just person turns to sin, he should not lose it all. There seems to be here what we can call a "bank account" mentality that is perhaps not uncommon today. Every good deed we do, every prayer we say, every Mass we attend adds something to our balance in some celestial bank account. If there can be deposits to the balance, why not withdrawals? One can be guilty of some indiscretion and still have a pretty good balance. But as the teller in my dream said, "That's not the way it works."

Our life with God is relational; there is a two-way commitment, a covenant. God never breaks His covenant with us, but if we, on our part break our covenant through sin, nothing is left. There is no celestial savings account on which to draw. However, God is merciful. Like the wicked man turning from his wickedness in Ezekiel, like the son in today's gospel who said, "I won't," but then changed his mind and obeyed, we can turn, be obedient, and be restored.

But all this is very far from the kind of life we should be living and WANT to live. The second reading leads us into a better path. We so love that passage that begins, "Though he was in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God something to be grasped." It is generally believed that this passage quotes an early Christian hymn, a hymn which tells of Christ's abasement and exaltation, that St. Paul includes in this letter to the Philippians. It is important to note that Paul prefaces it with the words, "Have among yourselves the same attitude." In other words, he is giving us a model to be imitated. Jesus, we are told, "emptied himself," no greater form of abasement can be imagined, than going from the divine to the human.

Earlier Paul had said, "Do nothing out of selfishness or out of vainglory; rather, humbly regard others as more important than yourselves." This is humility, a hard thing to do, but if we look at the example of Jesus, it should be possible. The hymn speaks of Him becoming a slave, a servant, and it is clear that Jesus is here identified with that mysterious "Servant of the Lord" of Second Isaiah—the servant who dies to atone for sin and then is exalted.

In the present political situation, with its emphasis on being "first" and "becoming great again," it is difficult to speak of humility, but we are warned by Jesus that the one who exalts himself will be humbled (works for women, too). Mother Teresa of Calcutta said that "humility is the mother of all virtues. ... It is in

being humble that our love becomes real, devoted, and ardent." And we know how central St. Benedict considered humility to be.

Mother Teresa gives a "humility list" of 15 items; included is: "Do not dwell on the faults of others."

Makes sense: when we judge others it's usually to see ourselves as better. Again she says, "Do not seek to be admired." How we love to be admired! How we want to get credit for any good we do! But Jesus says, "Let not your left hand know what your right is doing.... Your Father, who sees in secret, will reward you." In parable has the servant, when he has done all he should, say, "I am an unprofitable servant; I have done only what I was obliged to do." Another remedy for self-will and pride is to remember that all we have that is worthwhile is God's gift.

Our hymn says Our Lord "emptied himself" (Gk. kenosis), a very expressive image, corresponding to Jesus' now accepting the lowest state imaginable. It presents Jesus career as an inverted parabola: emptying Himself, being born as the poorest of the poor, born of a despised race, then taking the form of a slave, being made obedient unto death, even a death of the cross. Of course that was not the end of the affair. His death was the low point of an inverted parabola, the movement then continues on to His exaltation, returning Him to His divine estate, now to the adoration of all creation.

While it describes the career of Jesus, it is also the design for our own lives—a reminder that the career of the Christian should conform to that of Christ: baptism, death, resurrection. We are called to share His humility, but we are also destined to share His glory. As Paul writes, "If you be risen with Christ, seek the things above, where Christ is seated at God's right hand.... For you have died, and

your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ your life appears, then you too will appear with him in glory.”

If we ask the Lord how to attain this, we hear His response through the prophet Micah: “You have been told, O Mortal, what is good, and what the LORD requires of you: only to do justice and to love goodness, and to walk humbly with your God.” By doing justice Micah would mean, along with all the prophets, to be merciful to the poor and oppressed, the widow, orphan, and resident alien; to love goodness would mean, along with Moses and Jesus, to love your neighbor as yourself, whoever your neighbor happens to be; and to walk humbly with your God means, simply--to walk humbly with your God.