

ORDINARY TIME PREPARATION CYCLE A – PART THREE

Introduction for 18th to 22nd Sundays: We have finished reading Matthew's Sermon on Parables and move now to a crucial narrative section dealing with the Church as First-fruits of God's Kingdom/Reign. Repeatedly we will see how the crucial step to enter that Kingdom/Reign is a deep faith in Jesus, a faith that rejects all other priorities and presuppositions.

18th Sunday

Background: To put the miraculous feeding of the multitude into context, it is preceded by two episodes. First, Jesus visits his hometown Nazareth but can work no miracles there because no one would believe that one of their neighbors who had grown up there could be the promised Messiah. Then Herod executes John the Baptist, putting his trust in earthly power and not in the divine. But now people whose hearts are truly hungering for the coming of God's reign of justice and peace throng to Jesus in a deserted place. And, after feeding their souls and curing their bodies, he feeds their physical hunger.

Discussion Questions

1. Like Moses with the manna, Jesus gives bread in a desert. How has Jesus already nourished you in your life's journey?
2. What is your heart hungry for now?
3. How do you hope that Jesus will satisfy that hunger?
4. What are you afraid that you will have to give up if you truly let the love of Jesus take over your life?

Practice: God's blessings often come to us through other people. Pick one person who has supported you during a desert time in your life, and tell or write to them about how grateful you are for them.

19th Sunday

Background: Though the setting of this episode is a cosmic miracle, the point is about the relationship between Jesus and Peter. Even in the midst of turmoil, Peter reaches out in faith and trust and takes Jesus's hand.

Discussion Questions

1. When has Jesus already taken your hand and brought you to safety?
2. When do you need to take his hand right now?
3. In the midst of doubts and fears, which person has been Jesus for you?
4. Elijah founds God's presence whispering in the wilderness. How has God spoken to you not in spectacular ways but in the quiet of your heart?

Practice: There are many magazines and journals to which you can subscribe or are available in libraries or online, even for free. Ask advice for which one might be best for you, and start making it a weekly practice to read at least one article.

20th Sunday

Background: God's covenant with Israel made them forever special. Yet God's love is not confined to one people. Even Jesus, it seems, has to be reminded of that fact, for even he has to look beyond labels and instead see and act upon a Gentile woman's trust that in him God's healing power is at work.

Discussion Questions

1. When have "labels" kept you from an honest relationship with someone in your own life?
2. How did you find the power to live in honesty?
3. When have you wished that you had stood up more boldly for something or someone you believed in?
4. What stereotypes about Jesus have you had to overcome in order to have a deeper and more trusting relationship with him?

Practice: A widespread Christian practice is the recitation of some version of the Jesus Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me a sinner. Every day this week set aside five minutes of quiet time simply to repeat this prayer to yourself. At the end of the week, reflect on what you have learned about Jesus and about yourself.

21st Sunday

Background: The reading from Isaiah tempts us to focus upon Peter's primacy, upon the papal ministry in and for the Church. Yet the gospel episode focuses upon Peter's growth in faith; the man who two Sundays ago doubted and so began to sink now boldly proclaims that this almost penniless, wandering preacher whom he is following is God's Messiah. That same faith and profession are the rock for any Christian in our relationship with Jesus.

Discussion Questions

1. If you had been asked a week/month/year ago who Jesus was, how would you have answered?
2. How would you answer now? Why?
3. How do you hope your relationship with Jesus will grow more deeply?
4. For whom have you been a rock? For whom have you helped loosen a burden?

Practice: If we take the least initiative, God can use us to bring healing to the world. Think of one person who might need a little support, and this week contact them in some way, expressing your desire just to see how they are doing and share how you are doing.

22nd Sunday

Background: Two week ago we saw Jesus having to abandon a stereotype and reward the faith of the Gentile woman, so this week we see Peter having to abandon his stereotype of how the Messiah who was to establish God's Kingdom/Reign was supposed to act. And so the Peter who last week was named "rock" is now called "satan," a deceiver, a tempter.

Discussion Questions

1. What part of Jesus's message makes you really uncomfortable?
2. How have you been "conformed to this age" rather than taking Jesus for your model?
3. What "fire burns in your heart" that still makes you want to follow Jesus? Even to the cross?
4. Which person has sacrificed the most for you?

Practice: What person, thing, attitude, habit concretely and frequently reflects how you are conformed to this age. Reflect upon how you will try to change that part of your life.