

OUR LADY STAR OF THE SEA WEYMOUTH

HOMILY FOR EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (B) 2nd AUGUST 2009

People sometimes wonder why we read the Old Testament.

The Church answers that question by saying that the Old Testament prepares for the coming of Christ, so by reading the Old Testament we gain a better understanding of Jesus.

Jesus said that he came to complete the Old Testament. This is particularly true of the Book of Exodus.

Exodus shows that God has a purpose that he works out in history. The Exodus involved a series of miracles by which God led his chosen people out of slavery in Egypt, through the Red Sea, through the wilderness and into the Promised Land into which Jesus would eventually be born.

There is much to be discovered by comparing the Old Testament reading with today's Gospel, so I will focus on one idea – the importance of wilderness.

Wilderness brings to mind a wild place. During the Exodus God led his chosen people through one of the wildest places in the world, the dry desert between Egypt and the Promised Land.

Geographically this was necessary because the wilderness was in the way. Spiritually it was necessary, too. In the wilderness Moses and the people learned a lot about God, themselves and their relationship with God.

Praying people throughout history have had the same experience.

God is encountered in the wilderness. In the desert the people were totally dependent on God for their lives. They depended on God to lead them. There were no maps or signs of any kind. They risked wandering aimlessly so God led in the form of a cloud.

They also depended on God for food and drink. There was nothing in the desert. Today's reading tells us how God provided them with food and drink.

The process is interesting. The people complained that they were starving. They began to regret leaving the security of slavery in Egypt for the risk of freedom with God. Moses presented their complaint to the Lord in prayer. God thought it was a reasonable complaint and responded by sending them food to eat. It was rather like a court case with God, the judge, deciding in their favour.

Let's compare this with the Gospel.

Jesus did not have to go into the wilderness but he felt a need to. It was the only place where he could pray. That's why his feeding of the five thousand took place in the wilderness. He had gone there to pray but the people followed him, bringing no food with them.

This gave Jesus the opportunity to teach the people how to relate to him and show how he was greater than Moses. Jesus, the New Testament, made up what was lacking in Moses, the Old Testament.

Like Moses, Jesus provided them with food. By doing so he confirms that it is reasonable to expect sufficient food. Food and drink is a natural right that God respects. We have a right to food and a duty to provide food for others.

Unlike Moses, Jesus offered them and offers us much more. He offers us himself. He not only gives bread, he is bread, the bread of life. He will sustain our lives both physically and spiritually, provide everything that we need both now and in eternity. This suggests a wider meaning of wilderness.

At times we experience what seems like a hostile wilderness – flu, financial insecurity, old age, too much rain, one difficulty after another. No one can help and depression sets in. This is our wilderness. We are dependent on God. We have to go through our wilderness if we are to reach our Promised Land.

Let's remember that we have someone to lead us, a leader greater than Moses, Jesus Christ our Lord, who has promised to provide all that we need to see us safely through and bring us to himself.

There's no need for us to complain like the people of Israel, no need to despair. We can put our faith in Jesus who is the bread of life, Jesus whom we will receive in the form of bread in a few minutes and who remains with us always.

He prayed in the wilderness, so perhaps if we pray in our wilderness we will meet him there.

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