

8th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle B

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

1st Reading - Hosea 2:16b, 17b, 21-22

In 930 B.C. the kingdom of David became a divided kingdom with ten tribes comprising the northern kingdom (Israel) and two tribes, Judah and Benjamin, becoming the southern kingdom (Judah). Hosea was a prophet to the northern kingdom and he prophesied between 750-732 B.C. and Israel was led into exile in 722 B.C. and strangers were settled on the land. The kingdom of Israel was no more.

It is of little wonder that Hosea forms his oracles in the form of God's judgment upon Israel. He condemns the empty pomp of Israel's purely external cult as well as the pride of the people in its wealth and military power. Hosea doesn't reject the idea of a monarchy among the Hebrews, but he does quarrel with the monarchy of the northern kingdom which is separated from the kingdom of Judah and the legitimate kingship of David. He rejects the founding of the paganizing sanctuaries in Dan and Bethel which had been built by Israel's first ruler, Jeroboam some 200 years earlier. He knew that Israel had forsaken Yahweh, its true king and its salvation, to take up the cult of the fertility gods of Canaan, the Baals, so that it attributed its prosperity to this cult and not to Yahweh. "Baal" is actually a term which means "lord." When this term is used alone it stands for Hadad, the Canaanite fertility god par excellence, and proclaims the fact that each locality had its own Hadad who was lord of the territory. Yahweh had come to be considered a god of the same kind as the Baals, bound to the land and essentially a purveyor of agricultural plenty. His worship was performed with rites borrowed from the sanctuaries of the Baals (cultic prostitution). The ritual was thought to have the inevitable effect of constraining the divinity in a magical way to give what was desired. It was against this religion, masquerading as Yahwehism, that Hosea protested. He sees Israel as Yahweh's unfaithful wife who will nonetheless be reconciled to Him if she turns back to the covenant.

[Thus says the LORD] ^{16b} I will lead her into the desert and speak to her heart.

Israel must return to the desert. This is not referring to a specific event in later history, but to the desert wandering which the Hebrews endured for forty years. The desert is not a permanent dwelling place but it is an ideal place to re-establish contact with Yahweh. Jesus began His public ministry with a forty day sojourn in the desert (Matthew 4:1-11; Mark 1:12; Luke 4:1-13).

^{17b} She shall respond there as in the days of her youth, when she came up from the land of Egypt. ²¹ I will espouse you to me forever:

Yahweh will restore the mediating covenant between Israel and creation (see Genesis 9:8-10). Even a right natural order depends on Israel's free choice and covenant.

I will espouse you in right and in justice, in love and in mercy; ²² I will espouse you in fidelity, and you shall know the LORD.

A religious recognition which brings devotion to His will. Knowledge of Yahweh is keeping His Law.

2nd Reading - 2 Corinthians 3:1b-6

It appears that the Corinthian people have been influenced by missionaries from Palestine. These missionaries regard themselves as supermen, heavenly men, the seed of Abraham, Hebrews par excellence. They think that they have the power to make others supermen like themselves. They seem to think of Christ as the supreme example of the heavenly man, despising His humanity. His death made no difference because He was just as "heavenly" before His death as after it. They seem to have no use for suffering or sacrifice, regarding their own success and wealth as a proof of their power as missionaries.

In response to the accusation of his adversaries that he is ever recommending himself, Saint Paul notes that whatever testimonial he needs is written in the very hearts of the Corinthians who by their faith bear witness to his worth.

1^b [D]o we need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you or from you?

It appears that Saint Paul's adversaries may have brought such letters. Saint Paul is not condemning letters of recommendation, after all the church of Ephesus had written such a letter to the Corinthians concerning Apollos (Acts 18:27). But, unlike other teachers, Saint Paul does not seek them for himself.

2 You are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by all,

Saint Paul doesn't shrink from praise of the Corinthians; they are his letter of recommendation as they bear witness to his worth by their conduct. Although some members have followed these new missionaries, the majority have remained faithful to Christ and the teachings of Paul.

3 shown to be a letter of Christ administered by us,

Saint Paul now shifts his metaphor – now Christ becomes the author of the testimonial; it is Jesus who produces the good in the Corinthians that testifies to Paul.

written not in ink but by the Spirit of the living God,

God effects all good things, using the services of His ministers. Man's sanctification depends ultimately upon God alone.

not on tablets of stone but on tablets that are hearts of flesh.

The Hebrews had their laws written in stone (there were 613 Levitical commandments, the stone tablets contained the ten commandments) and this is what the missionaries are trying to take them back to; but the Christian has the Law written upon his heart (see Ezekiel 11:19; 36:26; Jeremiah 31:33).

⁴ Such confidence we have through Christ toward God. ⁵ Not that of ourselves we are qualified to take credit for anything as coming from us; rather, our qualification comes from God,

God alone is the author of all good.

⁶ who has indeed qualified us as ministers of a new covenant, not of letter but of spirit; for the letter brings death, but the Spirit gives life.

The letter, the Old Testament Law, brings spiritual death because, in proclaiming commands and prohibitions that must be heeded without at the same time giving the inner grace necessary for their observance, it places men in the condition of being bound by what they cannot always observe fully. The Spirit, the graces given in the new economy of salvation, gives power to do what God wants.

“The Apostle Paul, after describing in a few words the benefits of God, states in conclusion: ‘And for such offices, who is sufficient (2 Corinthians 2:16)?’ Whence he also says in another place: ‘Such confidence we have through Christ toward God. Not that of ourselves we are qualified to take credit for anything as coming from us; rather, our qualification comes from God, who has indeed qualified us as ministers of the new covenant, not of letter but of spirit; for the letter brings death, but the Spirit brings life.’ Do we still dare to boast about the free will and treat with insult the benefits of God the Giver, when the chosen vessel [Paul] also writes very clearly: But we carry this treasure in vessels of clay, to show that the abundance of our power is God's and not ours (2 Corinthians 4:7)?” [Saint Jerome (A.D. 415), *Dialogue Against the Pelagians* 3,9]

Gospel - Mark 2:18-22

Last week we heard of Jesus' healing of the paralytic and in that miracle we saw indicators of Jesus' divine nature: He forgives sins, He can read the human heart, and He has the power to heal physical illness instantly. This week we hear Him answer the

question of fasting. His answer tells us about the connection between the Old and New Testaments (Covenants). In the Old Covenant the bridegroom has not yet arrived; in the New, he is present in the person of Christ. With His coming begin the messianic times, a new era which is distinct from the previous one. The Jewish fasts, along with their system of religious observances were a way of preparing the people for the coming of the Messiah.

18 The disciples of John and of the Pharisees were accustomed to fast. People came to him and objected, "Why do the disciples of John and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?" 19 Jesus answered them, "Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them?"

Jesus' answer to the question is based on such Old Testament passages as Hosea 2:16-20 (our first reading); Isaiah 54:5-6; 62:45; Jeremiah 2:2; and Exodus 16 wherein God's covenant relationship with His people is portrayed as a marriage.

As long as they have the bridegroom with them they cannot fast.

Jesus refers to Himself as the bridegroom and this saying indicates that the wedding is still in progress (the wedding feast lasted for seven days). The apostles are the guests at the wedding, invited to share in the wedding feast with the bridegroom in the joy of the kingdom of heaven (see Matthew 22:1-14).

20 But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day.

Jesus announces that the bridegroom will be taken away from them; this is the first reference He makes in this gospel account to His passion and death.

21 No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak. If he does, its fullness pulls away, the new from the old, and the tear gets worse.

The cloak may be symbolic of the universe, which Jesus does not merely patch, but creates anew.

22 Likewise, no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the skins are ruined. Rather, new wine is poured into fresh wineskins."

The wine may be a symbol of a new era which will not fit within the boundaries of the old.

"He has prescribed for His new disciples of the New Testament a new form of prayer. For this it was fitting that new wine be stored in new wineskins and that a new patch be sewed upon a new garment. What had prevailed in days gone by was either abolished, like

circumcision, or completed, like the rest of the Law, or fulfilled, like the prophecies, or bought to its perfection, like faith itself. Everything has been changed from carnal to spiritual by the new grace of God which, with the coming of the gospel, has wiped out the old era completely." [Tertullian (between A.D. 200-206), *Prayer 1*].

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