

4th Sunday Ordinary Time Year "B"

February 1, 2015

Readings: Dt. 18: 15-20; 1 Cor. 7:32-35; Mark 1:21-28

I have long since given up downhill skiing, but I most certainly remember the various straightforward symbols describing the degree of difficulty on the hill – green circles, blue squares and black diamonds. I quickly learned to heed the advice of the warning signs, or else. The obvious lesson– “Beyond this point, ski at your own risk...” I have seen the ominous signs. You have been warned; from now on you are on your own. That was all it ever took for me!

Similarly, once we think that we are not in need of God’s help, we continue at our own risk. Our first reading spoke of prophets who presumed to speak in God’s name something other than that which was commanded...these prophets were disobedient, going beyond that which they were commanded. Accordingly, they were warned.

The warning signs are not significantly different with regard to our faith. The ship has long been seen as a symbol for the Church. The barchetta was an ancient symbol, hearkening back to Noah’s Ark and also to this very passage in today’s Gospel. The ship is the Church tossed on the sea of disbelief, worldliness, and persecution but finally reaching safe harbor with its cargo of human souls.

Of late, there is no question that we have been tossed around, buffeted in the winds. We have been chastised in some cases because of our own failures– deservedly so– while in others, we have been challenged because of our deeply held moral convictions that fly in the face of an increasingly secularized nation.

When people speak or act falsely speak in God’s name, the potential damage is severe. *Corruptio optimi pessima est*, says the Latin proverb: “the corruption of the best is the worst.”

For many reasons, quite understandable, people are asking many questions, trying to make sense of the uncertainty, both in our world and in the Church and may be looking for some guidance. First, our prayer must remain our fundamental priority and commitment. Without a vibrant prayer life, we rather quickly disintegrate, perhaps not overnight, but over time. This remains a real danger, and we mustn't underestimate its influence. Fading away, slowly but surely, is a real concern in today's Church.

Far too many have left the Church, seeing her as irrelevant, outdated, or too difficult for them. Others have seen the very real and shameful scandals only hasten their exit. "We are the people he shepherds, the flock he guides," reads the psalm for today. We mustn't forget that the Lord is both our shepherd and our Captain. But one thing seems clear- the days of waiting for people to come to us are long since gone. We must find creative ways to invite people back, knowing full well that perhaps it may take a very long time.

To St. Francis de Sales, whose feast we commemorated this past is attributed a saying that I find quite instructive: "In the royal galley of divine love, there is no galley slave. All the rowers are volunteers." Unity with the Church cannot be forced; it must be deeply felt, even when our own righteous anger may seem to question her prerogatives.

As the Church is made up of flawed human beings, people within the Church will error, have erred, and will continue to do so. Our history is filled with enough examples, as are our own lives. Yet, we forge ahead, confident that the Church has been able to accomplish so much good over so many centuries precisely because Jesus Christ is guiding the ship to safe harbor.