

Twenty-second Sunday of Ordinary Time

Year A

Jer 20: 7-9

Ps 63:2, 3-4, 5-6, 8-9

Rom 12: 1-2

Matt 16: 21-27

Daniel J. McLaughlin, O.S.A.

This year the feast of St. Augustine is special because it is celebrated on a Sunday. Therefore, I will attempt to bridge the readings of feast day and those of Sunday, the Twenty-second week in ordinary time.

In the gospel for the feast of Saint Augustine, Jesus announces “He is the gate for the sheep; and...He came for His sheep that they might have life and have it more abundantly.” (John 10:7-8). In his *Confessions*, St. Augustine described how he struggled to accept being known as one of God’s “little ones.” The metaphor resonates with the simple creature that is the lamb, which, according to Jesus, seems capable of not much more than knowing its masters voice. To accept these descriptions Augustine needed the grace of humility in order to accept our Lords voice calling him as one counted among those who are not lost but, instead, are found and saved. In this gospel passage Jesus declares that he is “the good shepherd”, and, “I know mine and mine know me.” The phrase to know reminds us of the desire of Adam and Eve to know and therefore, “be like gods” by eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and bad in the Garden of Eden. After the fall from God’s grace, order of God’s creation is restored through his son, Jesus. Now, all of frail humanity is invited to take from the fruit of the tree that is Jesus. This fruit - His Body and Blood - is not forbidden to those who wish to know and be known.

In Acts 2:42- 47, we read: “All who believed were together and had all things in common.” Often we think of the first believers sharing possessions of value in the spirit of a Christian commune. Another kind of sharing is the knowledge of how sin has affected the community and how it is nourished and restored by sharing the fruits of the cross of Christ.

In Romans 12:1-2, from the Sunday readings, we are told “to not conform ourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what the will of God is, what is good and pleasing and perfect.” We learn to recognize the voice of the good shepherd when we allow Him to know us. The reorientation of our mind toward the true gate that is Jesus leads to the conversion of our heart.

In Matthew 16:21-27, Jesus says that to follow His way we must first deny ourselves and our will to acquire as we see fit. He asks, “what profit would there be for one to gain the whole world and forfeit his life?” The question invites us to stop and reflect on our direction in life and to ask ourselves what it is that we want and in acquiring what we want where are we going with it. St. Augustine desired fame and fortune without first knowing the Lord of Life. The praise of others is what he needed to shun in order to know the way of our Lord. When Augustine finally rejected these earthly pleasures he was able to sell all that he owned --his appraisal of himself-- and was able to enter the sheepfold of our Lord where he could experience life more abundantly. In hearing the guiding voice of the good shepherd and accepting its truth, Augustine and those of the flock are able to enter through Jesus, the gate to the City of God.

Exile and return is a reoccurring theme in the scriptures. The readings of the feast day and of Sunday speak to all people who, like Augustine, long to return to the right path to our Father through Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit.

In the Sunday gospel, Matt 16:26, Jesus asks: “What profit would there be for one to gain the whole world and forfeit his life? Or what can one give in exchange for his life?” The question begs us to stop and reflect on how little we have to offer God because of our sin. Without Gods grace we are helpless and even when we recognize this fact we will, like Augustine, continue the battle of our redemption on our own terms. The following description of the process of recognition may help illustrate my point:

“The terrible and destructive aspect of the godhead – the ‘Tremendum’ in theological language – originates as a subjective human experience, though an unavoidable one if our religious convictions and our rigid theology are smashed by the Grace of God. We live in a jail which we call our castle; a foreign soldier breaks through the doors, comes to free us by blasting the walls of our castle – and we fight him with the last might of our broken ego, calling him scoundrel, knave and devil, until we are exhausted, overwhelmed and disarmed. Then looking at the victor with disinterested objectivity we recognize him: St. Michael smilingly sheathes his sword.” (Fritz Kunkel, M.D. *In Search of Maturity* pages 156-157, *The Choice is Always Ours*, edited by Philips, Howes, and Nixon. Family Library, 1975)

Happy Feast Day!