

13th Sunday 2010

Fr. Bob VerEecke, S.J.

Today is my mother's 95th birthday. I spoke with her this morning and she sounds wonderful. Now you may be asking why I'm not a dutiful son spending the day with her instead of being here with you, celebrating two Masses, two baptisms and assorted other pastoral duties. And I could say to you that the Gospel today brings into question our assumptions about what our priorities should be as followers of Jesus:

And to another he said, "Follow me."
But he replied, "Lord, let me go first and bury my father."
But he answered him, "Let the dead bury their dead.
But you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God."

The truth is that I would have loved to be with my mother but I just got back last night from a conference with other Jesuits about Liturgy and couldn't get to Long Island for this day.

Five years ago, on this weekend or at least on the 13th Sunday of the year, my mother was here with our whole family. Some of you may remember that all she wanted for her birthday from me was that I preach the homily that I would preach for her funeral.

She knew she wouldn't get to hear it after she had died, so wanted to make sure that she didn't miss what I would say.

Although an impossible task, I did the best I could and she seemed

pleased. But I still haven't told her that I've added one detail to the homily. Sparkles! The reason for Sparkles is that the whole day of her 90th she wore a dress that had sparkles in the fabric, traces of which she left wherever she went. In the pew, in John Wronski's car, all throughout our home. Now I know that the first word I will speak for my homily when Mom dies is "Sparkles"! I know that my family will immediately know what I mean.

Can I ask you if you heard anything "sparkling" in our scriptures today? I would love to preach a homily that sparkles, that matches the twinkle in the eyes of the two infants who will be baptized in the sparkling water of new life following our liturgy. I would love to preach a homily that sparkles, that matches the shining forth of the love of liturgy that I experienced again with my Jesuit brothers, the luminescent beauty of praying together with full, active, conscious participation. Praying as the body of Christ in full voice, with lively song and a consciousness of how the whole person, body, mind and spirit is invited to pray. The liturgies were always in English, French and Spanish, with a little bit of Latin and Italian for good measure.

I would love to preach a homily that sparkles on this beautiful summer day but honestly you have to dig very deep, "mine" the scriptures to find anything sparkling.

Did you hear anything sparkling? Twinkling? Luminescent?

Let the dead bury their dead. And another said, "I will follow you, Lord, but first let me say farewell to my family at home."

To him Jesus said, "No one who sets a hand to the plow and looks to what was left behind is fit for the kingdom of God."

But if you go on biting and devouring one another, beware that you are not consumed by one another.

These are all very hard sayings. They rub the wrong way. They make you question, "Is this what it means to be a follower of Jesus? Do we have to surrender our own interests and concerns, even ones as valuable as parental love and respect to follow Jesus?" The scriptures seem to say that. But what are they really asking?

Paul tells us that in Christ we are made for freedom. And what is that freedom about? It is about love of neighbor, not biting and consuming others. Freedom in Christ has to do with a complete liberation of our wants, needs, desires, passions that are self-ish, that must be transformed under the pressure of God's love wants, needs, desires, passions for us so that we become Christ-like. "Serve one another through love," as Paul says.

And the Gospel? This litany of very "hard sayings"? What it is it really asking? As followers of Jesus we are asked to surrender everything for the sake of the kingdom of God, as Jesus himself did. Remember the context of this passage: in Luke's Gospel,

Jesus is resolutely determined to go to Jerusalem, where he knows he will be rejected and even put to death. Should it surprise us that the Jesus who is going to Jerusalem to give his life in sacrificial love asks those who choose to follow him to do the same?

The more I mined these scriptures I began to see twinkling, then sparkling, then a diamond. Remember that the diamond, this beautiful, carrier of light is the hardest surface in the world. Nothing can scratch it except another diamond. The diamond is formed from carbon-bearing materials exposed to extreme pressure and found deep below the mantle of the earth (go to Wikipedia to get the full story on diamonds.)

I wonder if the call to discipleship, the invitation to leave everything behind and focus out attention on Jesus' way of living and self –surrender, might be the diamond, the precious gem that sparkles with light and beauty.

I know that my mother on her 95th birthday is a precious gem, as she has loved and served and followed Jesus in her own way. Sparkling!