

ORDINARY SUNDAY XVIII "A"  
AUGUST 2/3, 2014

Recently I read German Cardinal Walter Kasper's book, *Mercy*, a work Pope Francis states in a dust jacket quote has "done me much good." . The theme and practice of divine mercy pervades all of this weekend's scripture readings.

For Cardinal Kasper, *mercy* is *the fundamental attribute of God*. Divine mercy as revealed in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, is more than pity or sympathy--feeling sorry for an individual or a community of people in the face of the sufferings, trials or tragedies of life. Divine mercy is best defined as empathy and/or compassion--"feeling with"-- entering into the subjective experience of suffering of another individual or community and actively working to alleviate or at least lessen the burden another is carrying. It is solidarity in the true sense of the word.

In today's reading from Isaiah the prophet is addressing his fellow countrymen experiencing the trials of exile. They are on the point of despair. Life has become burdensome. In the face of their situation the prophet issues an invitation to "come to the water"; "come, receive grain and eat". He is reminding the people of God's mercy and faithfulness to their ancestors in their desert journey from slavery, sin and death in Egypt to freedom, forgiveness and life in the Promised Land during the Exodus journey under Moses where God physically provided water in the desert from the rock and manna and quail for the people to eat. As God provided for the physical needs of his people then in his mercy, so in his mercy will God provide what is needed now in their trial. Physical bread and water become the sacramental means whereby God demonstrates his mercy, his solidarity, his faithfulness to the covenant with his people.

In the Gospel, Jesus encounters a similar situation. Disembarking from a boat on the other side of Lake Galilee he is confronted by a vast crowd of people who preceded him to the other side of the lake who also are burdened by life's trials. The evangelist tells us that disembarking from the boat Jesus looked out at the vast crowd and that his "heart was moved by "pity" (other translations more correctly state "mercy" or "compassion") and he

immediately proceeds to “cure their sick.” Like God in the first reading, Jesus does not remain aloof from the plight of people, offering mere pity or sympathy, but engages in active mercy and compassion. As a further visible sign, Jesus then proceeds to physically feed the gathered crowd with bread and fish. Like the first reading, bread becomes the outward sacrament of mercy. No preconditions are placed in either reading on the recipients of divine mercy, no litmus test of rightness of belief or faith practice, no conditions of worthiness. Simple human need and suffering moves the heart of God and Jesus to action. As St. Paul reminds us today nothing can separate us from the love of God in Jesus.

Today’s first reading and Gospel point us toward the Eucharist, in which Jesus offers himself to us as the “bread come down from heaven” to satisfy our deepest longings for God amid the burdens, cares and trials of our life: for mercy, healing, forgiveness, peace and justice. Like the disciples, through the Holy Eucharist, we have communion with and possess the life of Jesus with and within us. In response, Jesus in turn, invites us to imitate his mercy. Jesus is calling each of us, as he did the disciples on that day at the shore of Lake Galilee, to break open this divine life within us, to ourselves be bread taken, blessed, broken, shared; a cup of wine poured out. Like the disciples we may object that we cannot possibly alleviate the hungers of the world. No, that is true, but we can all do something about the hungers and thirsts we encounter every day. Our bread may be small—a smile, a listening ear to someone who is troubled, a word of welcome to a stranger or guest here at Mass, standing in solidarity with refugees and other victims of human cruelty, working in various ways for the promotion and protection of human life from conception to natural death by advocating with our lawmakers, volunteering to serve at a community meal site such as “Food at First”, becoming involved in Stephen Ministry in our parish, learning about and choosing involvement in one of the areas of our parish’s Social Justice Committee’s many programs of outreach—these and many other ways may seem small. But remember, a single piece of bread physically or spiritually can nourish one person. That same bread broken and shared nourishes two people. Such is the way by which we become the food and drink of God’s divine mercy, through which multitudes are fed and human hearts healed.