

12th Sunday in Ordinary Time cycle B
June 25, 2006

Recently, Pope Benedict the 16th made a trip back to his motherland, a trip which was a strange parallel to the trip taken by his predecessor, Pope John Paul II, when he returned to his native Poland. Pope John Paul II returned to a land which had been conquered, and which was just beginning to emerge from its oppressed state, an uprising which the oppressors rightfully feared might happen with the advent of an out-spoken, commanding figure such as was John Paul II. Pope Benedict's trip to Germany was in many ways more somber, without the tinge of the hope which comes with the winds of change: He visited the remains of concentration camps. He grieved once again over the staggering destruction of human life which took place. He queried as to how this could happen in his own beloved homeland. And he raised the question which has been posed by believers and disbelievers alike since before probably the time of Job: where was God? Where was our loving Father, our merciful God, when trainloads of victims were being brought in? Why did God, who is all-powerful, *not* stop the hands of the Nazis? Among believers, few ask why God does certain things, because we understand all about free will and man's ability to love, and that man brought sin into the world and that man continues to sin. But the question on the flip side is still there, and is not so easily dismissed: not why did God do this or that, but why didn't he? Why didn't he stop what was happening, why didn't he intervene? Whether it is a holocaust, an accident, a job loss, or a break-up in a relationship, man is often left asking, why not? Why didn't God step in and stop this from unhappiness from reaching man, stop it from reaching me?

In the Gospel passage we heard today, the disciples are out in a boat, on the sea, when a squall suddenly comes up; not unusual for the sea of Galilee. And it's a strange scene, what with the water sloshing over the sides, the boat clearly heaving up and down and up and down, the disciples furiously bailing out the water but not fast enough, because it was taking on water and they were in fear of perishing. And I can only imagine the din, the noise of all this; meanwhile, there is our Lord, sleeping like a baby in the midst of it. The storm does not wake him up, all the commotion does not wake him up, but his disciples do, and they don't ask him "how can you be sleeping at a time like this," or even "how can you even sleep through this?" They ask him, "Lord, do you not care that we are perishing?" There aren't too many expressions in the language of man more stinging than that implication, "do you not care?" It's accusatory; it's indifference to my suffering, nonchalance to my pain, to the danger I'm in. Some of our greatest frustrations in life will come from the fact that situations arise when we do care, but are powerless to do any thing. And what do we do when we care about someone and something happens to them, or is about to happen to them? We intervene. That's the real question being put to Jesus; that's the real question Job posed in his dialogue. It's the question which was asked at Auschwitz, and it's the question I asked the night my dad died on the operating table: Lord, I believe, no, I KNOW you have the power. Why didn't you intervene?

The implication of the question—that Jesus doesn't really care—is as much a slap in the face as was the literal slap in the face which Jesus took when he was cruelly mocked before his crucifixion. Does he care? Has anyone ever even come close to caring about us as much as Jesus has, and does? Do we still have to wonder how he feels about us after he set aside his glory as God and humbly came as one like us, and not only as one like us, but in an age and place and manner in which he epitomized humility and poverty? And that he endured not only the mockery, but the physical pain of the scourging, and the carrying of the cross, falling again and again and using his strained strength to get up for our sakes; and that he forgave his persecutors, and that he forgives us. Doesn't care? He could not care more than he does; his care meter is all maxed out. So if he did care, then why did he remain asleep? Perhaps it was because they weren't

perishing. Oh, they appeared to be, and it certainly looked bad from their perspective: no sign of the storm letting up, boat taking on water, the Lord turning out to be the soundest sleeper in history. But to perish at sea was never God's plan for them. They weren't perishing because Jesus was there, ready to work his miracle in good time. Death at sea wouldn't have given witness to their faith as did the deaths which they would eventually face. This episode was so that they could see Jesus' power at work; the whole point of the storm was so that Jesus could intervene when all seemed lost, not just so that they would be saved, but so that they would be witnesses to his great power over nature, so that they could go out and forcefully and convincingly proclaim that He is God. Jesus was there to still the waves and calm the sea, not because they were about to die, but because they were about to really begin living: living their lives for him, in witness to him. And this storm at sea would become part of their witness.

Everything I said about Jesus as regards his caring for mankind: that holds true for each and every one of us as individuals. What he did to save all the saved, he would do to save just me, or just you. It is beyond clear, that Jesus cares for each one of us. And yet...he still lets us ride out many a storm. And it may appear that there are storms which we cannot weather, to which we finally succumb. And if this life were all that there is, that might be the case, then perhaps he would be allowing us to perish. But as a people of faith, we no longer perish, and this life is just done; we pass, from this world, to the next, from this life to eternal life. And Jesus' great concern is with that passing. This sounds harsh, and painful, and may seem insensitive to someone who is currently in a state of mourning and grief, and I apologize if it does, that's not my intention here; but truly, we are better off making the passage at a time when we are most ready to go, than to pass at a time later on which is seemingly more convenient for us, but less opportune for our salvation. What matters not just the most, but totally, is that we pass from this life, to life with God. And that is certainly what God wants. He intercedes in our lives often enough: with an influx of grace here, with a miracle there. And other times, he lets well enough alone, because it is not the best time for him to intervene. Sometimes, he stills the waves and calms the sea. Sometimes, he lets us be tossed about in the boat—because the experience is not about the boat ride, or the waves, turns out that it's all about the faith that we need to cultivate in him who is right there beside us in the boat; neither making it easy for us, nor abandoning us, which he never does.

In his letter to the Corinthians, Saint Paul writes “brothers and sisters, the love of Christ impels us.” Impel; a nice, rarely used intransitive verb meaning to drive, to push; in other words, Christ's love causes us to act. The love of Christ impelled the apostles to give the remainder of their lives over to him, to spread his Gospel; it drove Paul to compose his epistles, and his love will drive us, push us, to act as a people of faith even in the midst of the storms at sea. Job had to learn in the most difficult way the ultimate lesson in humility: man did not make this glorious world, man was the one who broke it. And man was able to fix it only by being joined to God through the coming of Jesus. I know I can't help myself but to ask “why” sometimes, but faith tells me that “why” is not to be my question. My question to God is to be “what,” as in “what do you want me to do?” Or “how” as in “how do you want me to answer your call?” Or even “where” as in “where do you want me, right now?” Sometimes, our part is not to question God as to why he is allowing the storm; our part is to be bailing the water furiously, occasionally casting a glance over at Our Savior, knowing that indeed he cares, and when the time is right in his perfect plan, he will then still the storm and calm the waves; until then, keep bailing the water, and keep trusting in his plan.