

## FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME - FEBRUARY 5, 2006 - BLESSED SACRAMENT

Our first reading today was taken from the Book of Job and might almost be taken as a classic description of depression: life a drudgery, months of misery, troubled nights, restless sleep, day after day flies by like the wind: “I shall not see happiness again.” The Psalm of response, of course, hastens to reassure us: “The Lord heals the brokenhearted, and binds up their wounds. He tells the number of the stars and calls each by name”—and if the individual stars, then surely he has a care for you, the Psalmist tells the depressed.

But the real counterweight to Job’s complaint is found in our Gospel reading, which is part of the first chapter of St. Mark’s Gospel that we have been listening to for the last three weeks. It tells the story in summary, encapsulated form of the messianic impact that Jesus makes: his call is enough to make men leave their occupations and follow him, we heard two weeks ago; he teaches with authority, we heard the crowds exclaim last week; many people with various ailments are healed by him, we have just heard today. All of this is designed to illustrate for the reader, or hearer, the Good News of the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God in the teaching and works of Jesus of Nazareth.

Some of you are old enough to remember the film of Pier Paolo Pasolini, “The Gospel according to St. Matthew.” It was not at all like a Hollywood portrait of Jesus. Jesus is not a blond and blue-eyed Adonis; his and other parts are played by non-professional actors, most of them southern Italian peasants. The scenery is not lovely green fields, softly focused by the camera, through which Polyanna might gaily run; it’s stark, stony, barren, hard—it was filmed in a poor undeveloped part of Italy. The message has not been prettied-up either; all the dialogue in the movie is taken from the Gospel itself.

Scene after scene shows Jesus marching across the landscape, speaking his message. As he walks determinedly along the road, proclaiming that the Kingdom of God is near, ordinary people encounter him, perhaps stop for a moment to look at this odd man, and then accompany him or go their own way. The film conveys well the fact that at one point in human history it was possible, while going about one’s daily business, to run into Jesus of Nazareth on the road, to hear his voice, to be struck and challenged by his words, to have the chance to choose whether to stop and hear more or to go on one’s usual way, unaffected by the odd man and his even odder message.

I don’t know of another movie that better conveys the humble beginnings of Christianity and the sense that its basic message is the intrusion of the extraordinary into the ordinary and by means of the ordinary. Into everyday lives something unusual intrudes, but intrudes in the figure of a man like the other people in the story. Jesus doesn’t wear a halo, and angels don’t hum in the background as he speaks. But consider what we believe: that the Word of God became flesh, as the fourth Gospel puts it: took flesh in a particular man, born of a particular people, living in a particular time and place. Flesh—the ordinary—embodying the extraordinary, the Word

through whom and for whom all things were made.

Living two thousand years and six thousand miles from that time and place, we may wonder how we and others can still encounter Jesus, run into him? One of the main ways we can encounter him is precisely in such moments as this one: when his words and deeds are not only recalled in the Scriptures and the homily but are also re-presented--made present again--in the memorial of his death and resurrection around this altar. We did not come here today to engage in an archeological excursion into the distant past, but to experience for our comfort or for our challenge--or for both--the words that were once heard on the dusty roads of Palestine. What could happen then can happen today. The Mass--this Mass--is supposed to be an encounter with Jesus Christ.