

[Readings: Isaiah 55:1-3; Psalm 145; Romans 8:35, 37-39; Matthew 14:13-21]

The famous American Author Mark Twain once wrote, "I have known many troubles in my life, most of which never happened." I'm sure that all of us have become very familiar with specific troubles that, in the end, never happened. We simply conjured up their likelihood and worried over them as though we'd actually suffered through them.

In today's Second Reading from the Letter to the Romans, Saint Paul lists a number of possible threats to our relationship to God, and one of those threats is what he calls "future things." I'm sure if we all took a bit of time to try to think of one such "future thing" it would take us less than a minute to come up with something. But we won't do that because you'll spend the rest of the time during this homily thinking about that future thing you're worried about! Instead, let's focus on Saint Paul's conviction that nothing can separate us from the love of God, including all those future things that will never actually happen. Do you know the expression, "Every dark cloud has a silver lining?" Well, my best friend, Fr. Jim Bjorum often tells me that I have the gift of "finding the dark cloud behind every silver lining!" I'm not a pessimist, I am a realist!

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Trial or distress or persecution or hunger or nakedness or danger or the sword? Those lines have saved me from many trials that might have robbed me of courage and from many dangers that seemed poised to consume me. Memorize these words from Romans 8:35: *Nothing can separate us from the love of Christ.* Let's look at the contenders that St. Paul mentions. "Anguish and distress" can't take Christ away from us. Count the ways we suffer from grief, self-doubt, loneliness, depression, and personal failures. As difficult as these burdens are, they cannot dissolve our bond with the One -- the only One -- Who saves. "Persecution" can't do it: nothing that comes from the outside, no kind of social pressure, rejection, disapproval, libel, or shame. We have nothing to fear either from "famine or nakedness."

These and other material deprivations can cause great harm and even threaten our existence. But not our life, ultimately, because our life is in Christ. *Nothing can separate us from the love of Christ.*

Should we feel anxious in the face of “peril”? We live in a world full of reasons to be insecure: pandemics, racism, domestic violence, poverty, and economic instability. A sudden illness could wipe out our savings.

Paul assures us that even if the worst things we can imagine come to pass, they cannot put us beyond the love of the One Who gave His life for us.

How about “the sword”? Violence is the great dark love song of a generation that the Saint John Paul II called a “Culture of Death.” But Jesus Himself was a victim of capital punishment, and even the Cross could not break our communion with Him. In fact, the Cross became the very bridge through which our reconciliation with God was achieved and over which humanity can now safely pass for the grand reunion. *Nothing can separate us from the love of Christ.*

“Not death nor life” -- Our present state of affairs is not an impediment, as the Church’s position on Purgatory and praying for the dead has always suggested. “Not angels and principalities,” those ancient powers of the air that could be capriciously well-intentioned or malicious, just as the spirit of good or evil may inhabit a person today. Interestingly, Paul targets time as being no obstacle, whether it be the present or the future, now or later. One might hope to extend that to the past as well, because many people believe that God will never forgive what lies there. *Nothing can separate us from the love of Christ.*

“Powers” -- Worldly authorities like governments, churches, parents, human law, and public opinion -- cannot keep us from the Heart of God. And we need not be anxious about “height and depth,” shorthand for the heavens and the underworld, because these, like everything else that exists, are mere creatures in the hands of the Creator, Who is unreservedly on our side.

Paul speaks consistently with Isaiah, who insists that all who thirst can come to the water; and with Jesus, who invites multitudes to take and eat. There

is something for everybody here. No matter who comes, or what they need, there will be enough. *Nothing can separate us from the love of Christ.*

In our Gospel, the death of John the Baptist invites Jesus to contemplate His own mission to give His life for the world. Jesus had heard how John the Baptist had died. Jesus knew that He would be next.

And so, He wants to be alone, to mourn the death of His cousin and to contemplate the imminence of his approaching passion.

But the crowds won't have it. They follow Him. Even as He is contemplating the violence that human beings can enact, the sin of the world, He looks with compassion on the crowds. Violence is transformed by the love of the Word made flesh, Who heals the sick and feeds the hungry.

In this moment, Jesus reveals God's plan for us. Whatever violence we can experience, God will not abandon us. God's sacrificial love transforms a violent world order into a space of generosity.

As vulnerable creatures, we are subject to anguish, distress, persecution, famine and all sorts of suffering. But, none of this can separate us from the love of Christ, from the love of the God-man who gave His life for the world. Pleasant thoughts will not save us from such violence. Rather, only the love that emptied Himself upon the Cross, the love that survived death – the love that enters bread and wine and becomes our spiritual food and drink -- only the love of Jesus Christ can transform a violent world.

“The hand of the Lord feeds us, He answers all our needs.” So, let us receive the bread of compassion from the hands of the Lord. Come to the Feast of Heaven and earth, and then go out to feed a starving and thirsting world. Through this gift, may our eyes be formed to perceive even in the meaningless violence of this age, the first rays of hope of the age to come. AMEN!

[Readings: I Kings 19:9a, 11-13a; Psalm 85; Romans 9:1-5; Matt 14:22-23]

Once upon a time, a famous mountain climber began his most challenging task – to journey up the tallest and most dangerous mountain he had ever attempted. The journey took five days of slipping and sliding in sub-zero temperatures, blistering winds and unending blizzards. He could barely see the pinnacle of the mountain. It was within hours of reach. A great smile grew on his face as he began what obviously would be the last leg of his climb.

Getting closer to the summit, his foot slipped on a ledge and propelled him downward. Only his security rope held him still, dangling over the side of the mountain. His first mistake? He attempted the climb alone. No one was near him to save him. His second mistake? He attempted the climb on one of the worst weather days ever. He wasn't a religious man, but in desperation he cried out, "Help me, God!"

A gentle but firm voice was heard through the icy wind. "Do you trust Me?" was the question. "Yes, God, if that is you, I trust you. Help me!" "Cut yourself from the rope." "Is there anyone else up there?" "If you trust Me, cut the rope!" The man refused. His body was found a week later, frozen stiff. And hanging only ten feet above another ledge which would have saved his life.

This story sounds a lot like today's Gospel, doesn't it? The Divine Voice cries out, "Come!" "Cut the rope!" "Trust Me!" But we don't want to cut the rope, do we? We don't want to walk on deep and stormy waters, do we? We don't want to risk the unknown, the uncertain, the unproven. And so we die. We lose.

If we always do what we've always done, we always get what we've always got. We cannot expect God to deliver us from impossible situations if we ourselves are too frightened, too weak or too cowardly to trust Him.

How do we know that God is calling out to us? Do we expect to feel a strong and heavy wind or some rattling earthquake or some bombastic fire to prove God's presence and care for us? If so, then we reduce God to nothing more than a clever magician who can do what used to be called "parlor tricks." Our God is much more grand and glorious than that!

In today's First Reading, Elijah expected God to be revealed in epic proportions. But God is revealed in a "tiny, whispering sound." Elijah was given the grace to comprehend, to understand. And so he hides his face in his cloak as a sign of humility and submission. He stands at the entrance of a cave ready to do what God wants.

Ironically, the Apostles find God in the very "eye of the storm," don't they? In the midst of the chaos of their ship being tossed about offshore. It was "the fourth watch." That means that it was 3:00 in the morning. If you cannot sleep, 3 AM is tossing- and-turning time. If someone isn't home by 3 AM, it's pace-the-floor time. If the telephone rings at 3 AM, it's palm-sweating time. It is the worst of times. It suggests fear and helplessness, worry and regret, loss and despair.

For Benedictine Sister Joan Chittister, it is the best of times. She says that God is found "in the little things that shape our lives. In the contradictions that assail us, in the circumstances that challenge us, in the burdens that wear us down, in the actions that give witness to the values in our heart. God is in the stuff of life." Elijah is running away from his enemies and God asks him, "Why are you taking the easy way out?" Peter begins to sink and Jesus asks, "Where is your trust?" Elijah is sent back to continue his ministry and to pass the mantle onto the shoulders of Elisha to take over. We know what happens with St. Peter.

Look at the drastic lengths St. Paul is willing to go through if only his fellow Jews would have a change of heart and mind and come to the Lord Jesus Christ. He says that he would even be willing to be "cut off from Christ" if it meant the salvation of souls. He would sacrifice his own personal faith if it inspired others.

Maybe you and I, in our noble attempts to bring others to Christ and to the Catholic Church, or to a greater practice of the Catholic faith, feel like we have been "cut off from Christ" as a result of our efforts. In frustration, we might ask, "Lord, how come You are not answering my prayers? Why have my loved ones fallen out of grace and You are not working their way back to You?" This may be the thickest and the strongest rope of all we are still clinging to. "Cut the rope!"

Maybe we will find the answers in the waiting, loving arms of God. AMEN!

[Readings: Isaiah 56:1, 6-7; Psalm 67; Romans 11:13-15, 29-32; Matt 15:21-28]

How ridiculous prejudice is, yet how commonplace. From the earliest days that men and women have walked the earth, we have had this disturbing tendency to build walls, to separate people one from another. Whether barriers of race, nationality, religion or economic status, all of us can claim a share of guilt for maintaining those walls: the physical and social walls that separate US from THEM. In our readings, we hear of people who scale those walls to teach us all a lesson.

In the First Reading, we hear about the plight of foreigners and eunuchs who are afraid that they will be shunned and barred from the religious services of the Jews. They need not worry. Foreigners are welcomed warmly to the point of being deemed worthy of ministering to God and becoming God's servants. They are to be considered full participants in God's covenant relationship. No one is to be excluded who follows the spirit of God.

St. Paul extends this open welcome to all the non-Jews whom he has visited and to whom he has preached and served. Many of his fellow Jews refuse to believe in Jesus Christ and accept His salvation. So Paul turns to all the other nations of the known world and makes no fewer than three "missionary journeys" to all the known parts of the Western and Middle Eastern world. If the Jews do not listen, maybe other people will. Are WE listening?

This message reaches its high point in our Gospel. You think YOU'VE had a bad week? Look at Jesus. After John the Baptist is killed, Jesus withdraws, only to find more people needing nourishment, and He feeds more than five thousand! Crossing the lake, He calms the stormy seas and calls Peter to follow in faith. He heals many who are sick in Gennesaret before encountering yet another argument with some scribes and Pharisees over the interpretation of the Jewish law. He thinks he can get away with his apostles to the west coast cities of Tyre and Sidon, hoping to get a little rest. It is here that the Canaanite woman forces her way into the room and interrupts his fellowship.

The implied details of this meeting are lost on us.

Way back in the Book of Genesis, Noah curses the Canaanites as the “lowest of slaves.” The entire Book of Joshua tells the bloody story of Israel’s conquest of the land of Canaan, now called Iraq. The fighting continues between Israelis and Palestinians to this day. I sometimes question God’s decision to give a land already occupied by the Canaanites to the Jewish people through violent acts of war and bloodshed. I need to brush up on my Ancient Near East history!

The woman calls Jesus “Lord, Son of David.” This woman – this Canaanite woman – is the first woman in the Gospel of Matthew to publicly identify Jesus as who He is! Then Jesus continues the conversation. Unheard of for a Jewish rabbi to speak publicly with a woman who was not his wife! In doing so, Jesus makes the woman his religious, cultural and earthly equal. Her last remark, “Yes, Lord, even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table,” would merit her a perfect score of 10 in the Jewish/Christian Religious Olympics! She wins the gold medal for her “great faith!”

Who are the “Canaanite women” in our country and society today? What group of people make us cringe just by hearing the name of their group? The message of our readings today stretch us out of our comfort zones and our convenient boxes. Dear friends, we are the descendants of that Canaanite woman. We are the little puppies eating the scraps of food off the table of the sons and daughters of Israel. So, let us assume the posture of that Canaanite woman. Let us give thanks to Jesus, who is the son of David and Our Lord. And let us be grateful that the scraps from the table of Israel have been so generously bestowed to us.

When have YOU been welcomed, despite appearing to be an outsider, or feeling not deserving of love or forgiveness? How do we make ourselves a more welcoming community, a more welcoming household, a more welcoming family, a true “house of prayer?” How great is OUR faith? There are “the lowest of slaves” knocking on our church doors whose faith may be as great as the Canaanite woman’s is. Will we let them in as Jesus did? AMEN!

[Readings: Isaiah 22:19-23; Psalm 138; Romans 11:33-36; Matt 16:13-20]

While praying over the readings for today and reading some of the commentaries, I had a flashback to my dear mom giving me the key to the front door of our house on Detroit's east side. We kids were still in grade school, Mom had just started a new job. That meant that now we had to take brown bag lunches to school and let ourselves in the house in the afternoon. We didn't know back then that my siblings and I were now "latch-key children."

As she gave us each a key, her parting words touched my heart and seared into my memory: "Now don't lose them!" Sound familiar?

I and my siblings gave Mom the usual reaction: a sigh and the roll of the eyes! "We won't, Mom." The first week I was entrusted with the key, I lost it. Mom was right! How do moms know? "Don't lose the keys!"

Keys are important in today's First Reading and Gospel. Keys are significant, because the more you have, or the bigger they are, the more responsible you are expected to be. That's why we give people the symbolic "key to the city." It means that we have access always and everywhere, whenever we want. I guess I'm pretty responsible with 28 keys on my key ring!

Shebna is the fellow in today's reading from Isaiah who gets the wrath of prophecy. He was the prime minister of the time and used his power to grant access or to deny access to the king to his financial advantage. His authority was represented by the large key he carried on his shoulder as a sign of his office. He built an elaborate tomb for himself. He collected expensive chariots. He suggested that the King form a political alliance with Egypt against Assyria.

Eliakim would follow Shebna, but HIS track record wasn't much better. He, too, falls out of favor with Isaiah. Not only was Eliakim a doorkeeper, he had access to royal employment, benefits and privileges. And he let that corrupt him.

St. Paul tells us in our Second Reading that it is difficult, if not impossible, to know the mind of God, let alone to presume to speak for Him. Why is this so?

We as a Church get it right most of the time because we have the Holy Spirit guiding us as Jesus promised, and scores of generations of experience to

guide us. Why did you drive the car that brought you here to Mass today? Did you design the car? Did you build it? No. You trusted the engineer and the mechanic. Did you design and build the house you live in? Probably not. But you certainly trusted the architect and the construction manager that when you enter your house the roof won't fall on your head. So it is with the Magisterium, the teaching authority of the Church. We trust the Holy Spirit and 2000 years of experience and tradition.

We hear today the inspired words of St. Peter in today's Gospel. Because of his insight which came not from his own noggin but from God, Jesus rewards Peter with the Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven, with the power, the authority to open and close, to loosen and to bind.

Much can be said about what Peter was not. His faith faltered in moments of crisis, as when he tried to walk on water. He lacked courage in the face of outside challenge; witness his waffling on the matter of eating with Gentiles in Acts. Peter could not be depended on for loyalty, a failing that grieved him terribly in the time of his historic denial. He was as capable of getting the answer very wrong as well as spectacularly right. It is obvious that Peter was not chosen to lead the Church because he was perfect. His appointment did not come as a result of his strengths any more than it did in spite of his weaknesses. What made Peter a good choice, the premiere choice, is that the Holy Spirit demonstrably could work with him.

It has been pointed out that the Church is always one generation from extinction. Looking at our dwindling numbers at Sunday Mass in our Church, that may not be far from the truth! If you and I don't spread the Gospel, it will be just one generation away from disappearing from the face of the earth. It is compelling, isn't it? It enhances our sense of Christian responsibility. We need to get out there and work for the Gospel, or the Church could fade into history.

Although Jesus Christ probably would not recognize the patriarchal and hierarchical Roman Catholic Church of the 21st Century, He did nonetheless

found a Church to carry on His divine mission after His death, Resurrection and return to the Father. A community of believers, brought together in faith, empowered by the Holy Spirit and commissioned for service until the end of the ages. We also remember that each of us also are entrusted with certain “keys” – the chance to open rather than close the way to Jesus. To build more bridges than we burn. To welcome more people than we turn away. To serve more people than we refuse. The great American humorist Will Rogers once said, “Even if we are on the right track, we will get run over if we just sit there!”

The prophet Micah put it this way: “do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with Your God.” Jesus gave St. Peter “the keys.” What are “the keys?”

What are the keys? The gates of hell are unlocked by Sacraments; they open the way to eternal life. When a priest “looses” (releases) the grace and forgiveness of God upon a repentant sinner during the Sacrament of Reconciliation, or when a priest “binds” a man and woman together in the Sacrament of Marriage, it’s Jesus who’s doing it through him.

The supernatural power of the Sacraments conquers evil every time we take them seriously and rely on the graces they provide. Where is there a locked gate in your life, which needs to get blown open so that Jesus can rescue you from some sort of darkness? What will you do this week to utilize the Sacraments more deeply, more profoundly? Who do you say Jesus really is, and how do you encounter this Jesus in the Sacraments? Which Sacrament (Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist, Reconciliation, Marriage, Ordination, or the Anointing of the Sick) is most powerful for you personally? Why? Where does Mary fit in?

We pray for her intercession and protection. We listen to her as we would listen to our own mothers when she says to us as she said of her own Son: “Do whatever He tells you.” I can also hear her saying this to us as well: “My Son Jesus has given you the keys. Remember: Now don’t lose them!” AMEN!

[Readings: Jeremiah 20:7-9; Psalm 63; Romans 12:1-2; Matt 16:21-27]

There was a popular song several years ago, called, "Bad Day" by Daniel Powter. Some of its words are: " 'Cause you had a bad day, you're taking one down, you sing a sad song just to turn it around..."

If you think YOUR life is a "Bad Day," full of pain and struggle, look at the life of the prophet Jeremiah. Look at the life of St. Paul. Look at the life of Jesus!

Jeremiah faces devastating challenges in his prophetic ministry, summarized in today's First Reading. Of all the major prophets of the Old Testament, Jeremiah has suffered the most physically, spiritually and emotionally. His message falls on either deaf ears or rebellious ears. He has been assaulted physically and verbally so many times, it's hard to keep count.

He has now reached a point in his ministry when he says, "Enough! I give up!" His words which we hear today come from a despairing soul in prison. He has lost any of his worldly power, influence and wealth. He has nothing.

And in that dark despair he says, with wistfulness, maybe some anger, but also with a tender love: "You duped me, and I let myself be duped!" How many of us have fallen under the spell of love in a romantic relationship, in the depth of a close friendship, in the fellowship of fellow believers? We are "duped!"

We say things like, "You had me at 'Hello!'" "I'm so glad to have you as a friend." "Thank you for nurturing my faith-life." "I couldn't have done this without you." That's what Jeremiah says to the Lord. "I couldn't stop from witnessing to Your truth, O Lord, or to Your message of faith, hope and love, even if I wanted to. When I say, 'I'm going to be quiet in this situation. I will not speak up,' Your Word sets my heart on fire. I can't hold it in! I cannot endure that!" Wow!

Jeremiah's words probably express the feelings that many people of faith have at some point in their lives. He has run up against the prophet's lot: The faith in his heart he could not ignore, and the need to speak out from his faith, have led him to suffering and rejection. He feels "duped" and "seduced" because he feels God led him on only to seemingly abandon him. And even now he cannot rid himself of God's name, even though it has caused him torment.

You might not share Jeremiah's anguish in quite the same way, but you also may feel inner conflicts nonetheless. Can you want to believe but also have significant doubts? Yes, you can.

Has faith led you and me to take risks that now seem too risky or to make sacrifices that now seem too large? Have you ever felt "duped" by God? You betcha! Every time I read these words, I get a little "verklemt" because I hear Jeremiah saying these words with intimate love and not with disdain.

Have YOU been able to examine that feeling more closely and come to a deeper understanding of your life's purpose? I have come to know my identity and my mission very clearly, and it's to be a priest and to be here with you as your pastor! To give you my blood, sweat and tears... Mostly sweat!

Have you ever sensed that a decision or commitment you made for the sake of the Gospel would bring you hardship or suffering, as Jesus predicted it would for Him? How have you been compensated for your sacrifices?

St. Paul, no slouch to suffering himself, says pretty much the same thing in our Second Reading. Look at HIS track record: arrested, beaten, stoned, in prison, shipwrecked at least three times, and rejected. And yet he has the divine audacity to speak of the "mercies of God" and to tell those listening to his letter to offer what they do in this life as a living sacrifice. Go to work! Go to school! Go and shop! But let your every act be a statement of faith. Preach with the words of the way you live, beginning with respecting your body as a temple of the Holy Spirit!

My friends, this world doesn't have a clue as to how to live. Don't give into it or be seduced by it. Don't be "duped!"

Have a successful career, yes, but gain it ethically and morally.

Make money, yes, but remember where that money came from, and return to the Lord and to the human family a generous and grateful portion of that financial blessing, with a humble and grateful heart.

Accept the authority and power that have been given to you, yes, but let it reflect the Divine Authority and Power that guides your lives. Listen to the divine authority and power that comes from the Church.

This world sings, "I haven't got time for the pain." Jesus Christ says, "Take up your cross and follow in the way I walked."

The world teaches, "Look out for Number One – YOU!" Jesus Christ says, "Deny yourself and follow me."

The world says, "Turn over an obscenely big profit!" Jesus Christ says, "What does it profit you to gain the whole world at the cost of your immortal soul?"

How radical and counter-cultural is THAT! Those words are 2000 years old and STILL timely!

Students and teachers are returning to school for another program year. I challenge every student of studies and every student of life, and every teacher listening to me to make THIS Priority Number One: the search for truth. Religion and science are not in opposition to each other. The truth is the truth, and both religion and science can and do teach each other. Who is God creating me and calling me to be?

Priority Number Two: Never back down from the truth. Search for it, find it, and embrace it.

Priority Number Three: Share it! At home, at work, in school, and yes, even in the church parking lot! Let God's truth renew your minds, that you may discern what is of God, what is "good and pleasing and perfect!" AMEN!