

26TH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR - A - 2005
“He became one like us.”

As Hurricane Rita blows herself out after sweeping over the coastal towns of Texas and western Louisiana, here we sit, again with that helpless feeling. We listen to the gospel of Jesus and wonder what it has to do with life as it really is. At this very moment, the churches of those towns are empty because no one is left in those towns. Many of the churches have been destroyed, not to mention countless homes, businesses and, lest we forget, families. Nothing seems more irrelevant today than listening to Jesus verbally spar with the chief priests and elders. Maybe we need to rephrase the gospel if we are to hear its importance for us today.

And so the press asked the people of New Orleans, *“Hurricane Katrina is about to hit you. Is everything ready?”* The people said, *“We don’t need to do anything. We’ve been through this before. We’re not worried.”* And the authorities, local and national, said, *“Oh yes, everything is ready. Don’t worry.”* But when the winds blew and the floods came, there was no response from the people in authority, while many of the ordinary people who were not worried took whatever action they could to start reaching the people who were trapped by the floods. Which people were criticized by the press?

The first lesson of today’s gospel is clear. Actions speak louder than words. We must walk the talk. We must put our money where our mouth is. This reminds me of an old poem I’ve shared with you before.

A lion and a tiger were drinking by a pool. “Tell me,” said the tiger, “why you’re roaring like a fool.” “It’s not foolish,” said the lion with a twinkle in his eye. “They call me king of all the beasts because I advertise.” A rabbit heard them talking and ran home like a streak. He thought he’d try the lion’s plan, but his voice came out a squeak. A fox came to investigate, and had luncheon in the woods. So when you advertise, my friends, make sure you’ve got the goods.

But there are other lessons from this gospel. People with authority to lead must lead. That is their role. That is why they were elected. Anyone who seeks public office, or leadership of any kind, for the glory of it all or for personal advantage or wealth, is a dangerous person to have charge. You see, they may begin to think that the rules that apply to others don't apply to them. I think this is true in the church as well as in roles of public service and even business. (Think Enron.) Selfish people are dangerous people.

This is why Jesus was so upset with the chief priests and elders. They were in positions of power and authority. They figured they were above repentance and change. After all, they observed the torah, the law, not like the hated tax collectors, prostitutes and sinners. But why didn't they wonder how it was that the preaching of John the Baptist changed the lives of those tax collectors, prostitutes and sinners? Why didn't they see that God could be working through John in ways they had never thought of? They were clinging to their positions of power and authority.

We read in the newspaper this past week that the Vatican may clamp down on gays in the seminary, and refuse them ordination, even if committed to celibacy. We know that it is "one strike and you're out" for any priest who crossed the line even once in his past, twenty or thirty years ago. They are certainly not pedophiles and have clean records since then. We are told that this strict discipline is to build confidence and credibility in the church again. But I don't think that that will happen until some of our bishops act to correct their own abuses of authority that made the scandal the media event it became. It almost kills me to say that. We've been blessed here with bishops committed to help the victims first. Maybe it will happen when all the lawsuits have been settled. We'll see.

But we don't have to go to bishops to be discouraged. Way too many people have their babies baptized and promise to raise them in the faith, and

then fail to follow through. We never see them again. And, yet, many who said, “No” early on, are now having their children baptized and are enrolling them in our R.E. programs. With whom is God pleased?

And how are we supposed to lead? What model do we have?

Have in you the same attitude that is also in Christ Jesus, Who, though in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped, rather he emptied himself taking the form of a slave.

If anyone could have commanded respect from his status alone, it was Jesus. Yet, he chose to enter our world and to become one of us. He identified himself with us in our weakness. Did you hear that? He identified himself with us in our **weakness**. And we think that God is expecting us to be strong, to be perfect; without flaw, without sin. No! God expects us to be weak, imperfect and flawed. And, yes, he expects us to sin. God knows us. We can't fool him! But he is with us to encourage us. He chose to travel on our journey with us to nourish us and sustain us lest we fall by the wayside and give up. But we must admit our weakness, our need for a savior. We must admit our sin, as did the tax collectors, prostitutes and sinners of today's gospel. That is the only thing we can do. The rest is up to God and his saving, transforming grace.

Yes, St. Paul says we are living temples of the Holy Spirit. But he also says we are vessels of clay. We are fragile. We can be broken. And it is our admitting our fragility, our brokenness that brings us to God. God help me the day I should ever think I have achieved perfection for that is the day I will have said that I no longer need God; that I no longer need his transforming grace. “*Lord, I am not worthy to receive you.*” We say that before receive Holy Communion. And that is true. But it's not about us. It's about Jesus who still chooses to come to us in our weakness.