

The 8th Sunday of the Year – 2011.

Libya's battle for a new leadership seems to have grown out of a long period of oppression and brutality. This week world leaders are becoming anxious and involved about the political unrest there and in other Arab nations. With all that happening, it is strange that we should have this reading today from the prophet Isaiah because Babylon was only 400 miles to the East of Libya. I mention it because Isaiah is writing to the people of Israel who are captive in Babylon experiencing the same kind of oppression that many people in the Arab nations are experiencing today.

Those of us who live in a stable political system with a sound rule of law find it hard to imagine what it is

like to be deported into a land with no stability of government or accommodation, not to mention finance and basic living necessities. That was the situation of the Israelites who were deported to Babylon in the middle of the 6th century BC. In such a situation, where life and livelihood were at serious risk, it is easy to begin to believe that God did not care and that he had abandoned his people which, as Isaiah says, is what the deported people of Israel were saying.

Isaiah was in no doubt that this was untrue and he searched for the most powerful image of love that he could find to persuade the people of Israel not to lose hope. He compared God's love for them to the love of a mother for her infant

child. In fact, as Isaiah points out, the love goes further because even if a woman forgets her baby, God will never forget us. None of us can remember our mother feeding us at the breast but all of us know, because of our own experience or the experience of others, how powerful the love of a mother is for her child. That is one image of God's love for us.

On Friday, Fr. John showed me a fascinating list of questions about Catholic belief that had been generated by his first evening on the Catechism. I would love to sit down and wrestle with finding an answer to each one. One in particular struck following the first glance at the list: "What exactly is salvation?" One answer that I would give is that salvation is coming fully

to appreciate the depth of God's love for us and the difference it makes to being alive and being human.

Isaiah's words to the suffering Jews in Babylon remind us that whatever our situation of difficulty, wherever we are on the journey of life, God still loves us beyond anything we can imagine and he certainly does not abandon us.

Being the slave of two masters is not just a problem that existed in Jesus time. As the Gospel indicates, we have to choose between two priorities. On the one hand there is the necessary preoccupation we all have, quite rightly, with having enough resources to ensure we can live properly. All of us have this concern

and at different times of our lives it will take on greater or less significance. On the other hand there is the invitation to trust in the goodness and love of God which never leaves us. Clearly there has to be a balance between the two. It will always be necessary to strive for justice, for peace and for enough money to support ourselves and our families and, at the same time to give thanks to God for what he provides and to trust that he is with us in the journey to the fullness of life.

The balance is a difficult one to strike and Jesus' words invite us to avoid the temptation to become totally preoccupied with our material well-being to the exclusion of dependence on God and his providence. At times it will be easy

to trust in God and to give thanks, especially when things are going well. It is the bad times which bring the real test of our readiness to trust in God's love and his presence in our lives. At this point my mind always goes to Mary as she stood at the foot of the Cross, which was for her a moment of extreme pain and anguish. Her standing there, during those precious agonising hours, is all about the fact that not for one moment did she lose faith or trust in God.

Inevitable, as we continue on life's journey, are the trials and difficulties that cause us anxiety. And the anxiety is there to lead us on to improve the situation, but at the same time we must not lose our trust and hope in God because that

opens us to an appreciation of his presence and his gifts.

Often the anxiety and the fear can become so strong that we forget God and his goodness. Jesus knew the battle all of us have with our worries and fears; he knew how they can drag us down and sap our energy and zeal. That is why he uses the images we find in today's Gospel. He asks us to consider the birds of the air and the flowers of the field and how God provides for them. How much more will he provide for us? All he wants us to do is set our hearts on his kingdom and all these other things will be given us as well.

So how do we put this particular message of Jesus into action?

The presence of Christ and his Holy Spirit is always active in our lives and relationships. In prayer and in a continual openness to the Word of God we must constantly renew this conviction in our hearts and minds. The worries and fears that come to each of us need to be seen as an opportunity to refer the issue to God and renew our confidence in him.

This is what the Lord calls 'setting our hearts on his Kingdom first' and it is always difficult and seems to involve a risk that we would prefer not to take. Yet the Gospel assures us, and many Saints testify to the truth, that if we are ready to take the risk and have complete trust in God, a miracle happens and our lives are filled with God gifts and goodness in ways that we had never expected.

It will always be true that because of their suffering and hardship and the sad circumstances of their lives many people will be deaf to the message of today's Gospel. Suffering and isolation will be so great that somehow Christ's message of trust cannot penetrate their hearts. That is why it is so important for us to radiate the light and peace that comes from trust in God and we will be able to do it if, in the words of today's psalm, we can 'Trust him at all times and pour out our hearts before him.'