

26th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Scriptures: Ezekiel 18:25-28; Philippians 2:1-11; Matt. 21:28-32

Homily: Fr. Ken

The last novel of Jane Austen was titled *Persuasion*. It is less well known than her previous works, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility*. But *Persuasion* continues Jane Austen's great theme of love triumphing over social conventions.

In *Persuasion* the heroine, Anne Elliot, regrets breaking off an engagement eight years earlier to a young naval officer, Frederick Wentworth. When she meets him again she becomes aware of how she had been foolishly persuaded to give him up by those around her. Then, she was the daughter of a family and he was a poor sailor. Her friends and family warned her from marrying a man who was not worthy of her status. By the time the novel begins, her family has fallen upon hard times through her own father's foolishness, while her ex-fiancé has become a wealthy and successful captain.

The novel details how they meet again and shows how awkward their communication is. Neither talks about their feelings and they both try to avoid one another. As the novel progresses, Anne's regret becomes all the greater as she admires Captain Wentworth more. Eventually he is persuaded that she still loves him when he overhears her in conversation with a friend. He reveals his true feelings and they finally marry.

On the one hand the novel is a romance, but it is also a clever and witty exposé of the morals and manners of its time. It shows how society is primarily concerned with status and wealth at the cost of feelings of love or happiness, and it shows how this leads to great social hypocrisy and the state of inequity.

In the scripture readings for this weekend, we are given our own bit of persuasion.

The Gospel reading is taken from that part of Matthew's Gospel when Jesus is teaching in the Temple in Jerusalem. He has just thrown out the money changers, and he is being questioned and grilled by the most important members of the Jewish priesthood. Their agenda is to prove Jesus wrong and to get rid of him. Jesus represents a danger to their status and to their understanding of how religion is meant to be.

In the parable and its explanation, Jesus makes clear what the role of the chief priests is: they are the ones who say they will do God's bidding but do not do it. Instead, it is the tax collectors and prostitutes who hear the words of Jesus and change their ways. They are the ones who do what God asks.

One can almost hear the frustration in Jesus' voice as he reminds his listeners that John the Baptist had come to them, but they did not believe him. And now they have the Son of God before them; and all they want to do is destroy him.

In the reading from St. Paul's letter to the people of Philippi, Paul tries to persuade his readers to change their ways too. Paul uses Christ's love as a tool to persuade them to become like Christ by putting other people first. Loving Christ is not just a two-way relationship between one person and Christ. It is a relationship that opens the hearts of those who believe, so that instead of showing love just to Christ, they learn to show love to everyone.

When we listen to the Gospel, it can perhaps be tempting to feel a little superior. After all, we are not like the chief priests. We believe in Jesus and we follow him. But if we really examine our lives, we may very well find times when we have fallen short of what Jesus has called us to become.

In our nation, we are not likely to be executed for being Christian like John the Baptist or St. Paul, or so many other martyrs all were. We can believe in Jesus without putting our lives in danger. But there is a danger for us: the danger of complacency, of being so comfortable in the practice of our faith that we neglect to let it have a real effect on the way we live and the way we treat other people. Yet, if we are truly to follow Jesus, we are called to do the work he asks us to do, loving one another.

St. Paul says: "If love can persuade at all...then be...united in your love". Paul's letter may have been originally intended for the Christian community living in Philippi, but its powerful message still speaks loudly to us here today. It is just as much a letter to each one of us as to that original church in Philippi. The question is: Are we willing to be persuaded by love?