

27th Sunday in Ordinary Time

A few years ago my great-nephew died one day after a premature birth. The grief of his parents still sits within my heart. The birth of a child is a blessing we often take for granted. The infant mortality rate in our country is fairly low, so a pregnancy usually sets up the joyful expectation of a healthy birth. It doesn't always work out that way. Some women never wanted the child they are carrying. Some kids enter the world with poor health. Some children don't make it at all. Some parents who want a child inexplicably do not receive one. Children are so important to our society that pregnancy and birth stir up strong emotions - joy, shock or grief.

If a young couple wishes to be married in the Catholic church, they need to declare their willingness to accept children. The church has a wide range of prayers that apply to the various circumstances of childbirth: Ceremonies for the Blessing of a Child in the Womb, the Blessing of a Mother after Childbirth, the Blessing of Parents after a Miscarriage, the Blessing of Parents and an Adopted Child, and the Blessing on the Occasion of a Birthday, to name a few. Although we don't like to think of the worst that can happen, we have funeral rites for children as well, both for those who were baptized and for those who die before baptism. The variety of these blessings and prayers shows the desire of the church to serve families in as many ways as possible. After my great-nephew was cremated, we gathered the family for a funeral mass. As you can imagine, it was immensely sad. But it was also noble. It paid tribute to the gift of a remarkable life that because of its purity deeply touched the hearts of many.

Today's first reading tells how God prepared for the birth of children through the creation of man and woman. In today's gospel Jesus cites the same passage to speak about the permanence of marriage, and in the next verses he immediately shows his own affection for children. Between these passages the lectionary gives us Psalm 128. Like those two readings from Genesis and Mark, Psalm 128 is one option for weddings because it treats family life as one of the greatest blessings God gives. Those who fear the Lord can expect prosperity both in the field and in the home. The field will produce fruit to be placed on the table, and matrimony will produce children placed around the table. Psalm 128 includes these verses addressed to the husband: "By the labor of your hands you shall eat. You will be blessed and prosper. Your wife like a fruitful vine in the heart of your house; your children like shoots of the olive around your table." And because family life also contributes to a stable society, the psalm concludes with this prayer: "May you see Jerusalem prosper all the days of your life! May you see your children's children. On Israel, peace!"

As a single guy with no children of my own, I continually stand in awe of couples who want to share their love with a new generation, and parents who have welcomed children into their hearts and homes. The desire for children is a desire to share love, to sacrifice for the needy, and to receive blessings of joy. Not everyone gets to experience that blessing. But even those who yearn for children show their respect for the great gift that they represent. Jesus never had kids, but he wanted to share with them all the love he could, even the blessings of the kingdom of God.

Sunday, October 7, 2018