

## Week 19 – Ordinary Time – August 8, 2010

On my bedroom wall I have a photograph of my Grandpa Turner, taken in 1887. He was 12 years old, dressed formally, and posing in a richly appointed studio. The occasion was his first communion. We are accustomed to seeing 7-year olds in such pictures, but prior to 1910, first communicants were about the age of 12. Girls started wearing white dresses probably because they were just reaching puberty, so they dressed as though they were the bride of Christ, entering a permanent and fruitful union with him.

Pope Pius X believed that younger children should be eligible for first communion. So the Vatican permitted communion to kids who had reached the age of the use of reason. Some parents tell me their children have never reached the age of the use of reason, but it is generally understood to be about 7. The lower age for first communion took effect on August 8, 1910, exactly 100 years ago **tomorrow/today**. When our church was first dedicated, no children younger than 12 received communion here that day.

Whenever we share communion at mass, we recall the Last Supper, which took place at the time of Passover, which serves as the backdrop for today's first reading from one of the last books in the Old Testament, the Book of Wisdom. The origins of Passover are found in one of the first books in the Old Testament, the Book of Exodus. Those who ate the Passover lamb and sprinkled its blood on their doorposts avoided the tenth plague, which put to death the firstborn of families and livestock. This finally convinced Pharaoh to let God's people go from their slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land. Then Pharaoh changed his mind and pursued the Israelites, but his armies lost their lives in the Red Sea. Anyway, some 1500 years later, the author of the Book of Wisdom recalled this event. Wisdom says that our ancestors knew about the Passover in advance so that they might have courage. Moreover, it says the Passover is meant to help us too. The Book of Wisdom says to God, "For when you punished our adversaries, in this you glorified us whom you had summoned."

First communion ceremonies seem a long way from the threats our ancestors faced in the Red Sea. But when I was a kid, Mom always prepared a special dessert to celebrate first communions in our family. She baked a cake in a mold shaped like a lamb, then covered it with frosting and coconut. In doing so, she stepped right into the tradition of today's first reading, reminding us that the God who delivered our ancestors from slavery by destroying their enemies on the day after they ate lamb, would also keep the dangers of sin away from us if we ate frequently of the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. As kids, we should have learned all that, but we just liked the frosting.

Communion makes many Catholics feel comfortably close to Christ, but it also does something else – it gives us courage and confidence. We all face threats to our families, our homes, our country, our health, our morals, and our lives. We don't like to think about them, but they are

there. Nothing can protect us more than the Lamb of God, who is as close to us as this table every time we share communion.