

15th Sunday in Ordinary Time

I visited Kathmandu as a tourist in early 1984 over the Christmas break from my doctoral studies in Rome. Together with a monk from Conception Abbey who was working at my school, we traveled to India and Nepal. In Agra we saw the Taj Mahal, which was even more beautiful than any photograph I'd ever seen. In Nepal I'd hoped to see Mount Everest. As a kid, whenever I asked adults what famous event took place in the year I was born, 1953, they remembered the explorers who first reached the summit of Everest. When I finally visited Kathmandu, hoping for a panorama with the world's highest mountain, I was told, "Well, you can't see it from here." Air pollution obstructs your view of the biggest thing on earth.

This spring and summer air pollution worldwide has decreased by up to 30% because during the pandemic people aren't driving or flying as much as we used to. In May, a photographer in Kathmandu climbed a hill and took a shot of the mountain range in the distance. To his surprise, his photo included Everest. It was the first time in 50 years people could see it from Kathmandu.

Pope Francis has been calling us to take better care of this earth, our common home. Some human habits cause problems in the environment. The Book of Genesis records one consequence of the sin of Adam and Eve in these terms. God, who had commanded them to fill the earth and subdue it (1:28), now told Adam and Eve, "Cursed is the ground because of you. In toil you shall eat its yield.... Thorns and thistles it shall bear for you" (3:17-18). Sin wasn't the fault of the earth, but the earth suffered because of human sin.

Saint Paul developed this theme in his letter to the Romans, as we hear today: "creation was made subject to futility, not of its own accord but because of the one who subjected it." It wasn't creation's fault; God had made it good. But now creation hopes for something better, to be "set free from slavery to corruption." Paul laments, "all creation is groaning in labor pains even now."

Paul frames this with one of the most hope-filled verses in the bible: "I consider that the sufferings of the present time are as nothing compared with the glory to be revealed for us." As surely as creation groans for something more, Paul says, "we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, we also groan within ourselves as we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies." We all suffer physical, spiritual and emotional ailments that yearn for redemption, but we have well-founded hope because we have the firstfruits of the Spirit.

This passage confidently reminds us that the best way to interpret the present is with the future. Creation yearns for something greater, and so do we. The future helps us endure life in the present. Our sufferings are nothing compared with the glory to be revealed.

While we await that glory, we can take some steps to make life more tolerable for ourselves, and for others, and for the earth. We can critique our use of energy, such as deciding when to drive our cars. We can avoid the habits that cause others to suffer, especially when we're at home. Even though we have confidence in the glory to be revealed, if we clear away the pollution of our sins, we will see the glory of God's love even now, as clear and majestic as Everest.

Sunday, July 12, 2020